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Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office.

April 5, 1893.

No. 482.

\$2.50
a Year.

Published Weekly by Beadle and Adams,
No. 98 WILLIAM ST. NEW YORK.

Price,
Five Cents.

Vol. XXXVIII.



"WAL," SAID YANKEE JOSH. "THIS LOOKS LIKE HUM. I GUESS I'LL GIT DOWN."

New York Ned in California;

OR,

The Brothers of the League.

BY W. J. HAMILTON,

AUTHOR OF "THE BOY SURVEYOR," "ZEBRA ZACK, THE TEXAN," "THE BRANDED CAPTAIN," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CAMP.

THE setting sun just tinged the white crests of the sierras with floods of golden light. On every side rose the great peaks, towering crest above crest, drawing around one grand summit, which lifted its mighty head high above the others, like a great parent keeping silent guard over its children. Half-way up to the crest of this parent peak, a band of rangers had made a camp. These were the days in the history of California when lawlessness held complete rule, and crime was punished by the strong arms of the mountaineers. No sticklers for quibbles in law were they. Their rude minds caught at the crime and the punishment due for a great offense, and dealt that punishment with an unsparing hand. The lust for gold had drawn hither bands of men, too lazy to work, and lawless enough to wring from the sturdy toilers their hard-won "dust," by robbing, gambling and murder. These men, consorting in companies, or "leagues," had mountain retreats, inaccessible to those not acquainted with the clew, and from these they issued to their work of violence and blood.

This state of things at length brought forth, in self-defense, a race of resolute spirits, styled Regulators, who administered "frontier justice" to those who incurred its penalties.

The group camping up on the sierra were of that type; rough-looking, bearded fellows, smooth-faced striplings, and handsome young men, including New York Ned, all well versed in border ways and wiles. The occasion which had called them together was this: Somewhere among the sierras there dwelt a band of robbers, whose suspected acts were such that the strong arm of frontier law was necessary to "wipe out" the villains. A number of miners and prospectors had been killed in the mountains, and robbed of their gold and stores. No one was spared to tell who did the work. The miners, therefore, in that section, had banded together as Regulators. The chosen captain was a Maine man, a muscular, hard-fisted six-footer, skilled in woodcraft, and fitted by nature for such a command. His lieutenant, on the contrary, was a smooth-faced, handsome stripling, perhaps twenty years of age. But not one among the band who did not approve their captain's choice. Edward Elliot, or New York Ned, as he was sometimes called, though young in years, was no child in mountain-craft. He was a sure shot, a practiced runner, and possessed of rare courage. A better arbitrator than Ned Elliot was not to be had. He settled all their differences, presided over their strange tribunals,

which sentenced robbers or murderers, and dealt out unsparing justice to all. That smooth-faced boy had encountered dangers and difficulties bravely, at which many would have flinched; and yet, he had not been bred to such things. He was a New Yorker, whose bad luck in the East had stripped him of every penny, and who came to this wild region to make up for his losses; hence his sobriquet.

The band had built fires, and was cooking their evening meal. It did not take long to provide it. The sierras swarmed with small game, and each miner had brought down a bird of some kind and browned it, spitted on a stick or ramrod over the fire. The captain and lieutenant sat together, and were talking in low tones of the work they had to do.

"I tell you," said Adam Lane, the captain, "if I find any of these scoundrels they will have but little time to say their prayers. I will have revenge for the death of Garry Burnet."

"Ah, poor lad," said Ned. "He would not listen to reason, though I tried to make him wait until a party went to Sacramento. I told him the foot-hills were full of villains who would not hesitate to murder him for one-half the quantity of gold he had on his pack-mules. And now his bones whiten in the sierras."

"Yes. He was so happy because he was going home to the States, and could marry the girl he had loved so long. I am a rough fellow, Ned, but it makes my heart very sad when I think of that girl, waiting in vain for the coming of one whose face she can never see. If I knew the man that killed him, God have mercy on his soul!"

There was no irreverence in the speech. The mountaineer was in sober earnest.

"Will not the robbers retire when they know we are coming?" said Elliot.

"Our duty is plain. We must hunt them down in any case."

"The men will do their best. Few among them but has some injury to revenge, some murdered friend to remember. But it puzzles me to think where the ruffians *can* hide. Sometimes I think they have gone through the pass and are on the other side of the range, laughing at us on this side. But we will hunt them down if it takes a dozen years."

"Right, Ned: right. Murder is getting too much of a trade in California. If such a thing is possible, I will root out the name robber from this district. But we do not know a man of the band."

"That is the trouble. If we could light on one, and then let him run loose, we might track him to his hole. But it is up-hill work as it is."

"What luck have you had lately?" asked Lane.

"Not much," said Ned, sadly. "It seems as if the bad luck which followed me in the States clings to me here. I don't believe there is a man in California who has worked harder than I to make a raise. I have dug when the rest were playing monte; I don't gamble, nor drink much, and yet I can't get ahead. My claim is always weak and my earth poor, while that of a man ten feet away is rich."

"Don't give up, Ned."

"Give up? Not I! It isn't in the *blood*. I'll stay here until I either make a raise or lay my boues by the side of Garry's. I've too much at stake. To be sure, I have no girl waiting for me in the States, but I have an old father and mother to take care of. And if I can't make a raise for myself, I always manage to send them a few hundred every three months."

"Well, keep up good heart, young 'un. You will strike something rich yet. These chaps that are unlucky at first always do that, sooner or later. Why, when I came out here first I was just like you. Everything was against me. I had just no luck at all. I could not pay my bills half the time; and, as for taking a hand at monte, or betting on a good hand, I was nowhere. But after a while my luck came, and I've got forty thousand in the bank at 'Frisco. Now, all I want is to lay out these red-handed ruffians, and then I will go home to the States."

"I don't think I shall ever leave California," said Ned. "I love it. This wild life I am leading suits me, and if we can only clear it of these vile Greasers, whom I suspect of being the instigators of these robberies, if not the men who do the work, the land will be a glorious one to dwell in."

"Do you think so, Ned? Then you and I agree. There are some English and Americans in the band, but this cut-throat business is Greaser all over. No other people on earth would do these cold-blooded murders. Ever since Fremont conquered them they have hated us, and we must look for such acts as these. Ha! what is the matter there?"

A commotion had risen near one of the fires, and the officers rose and walked toward it. Two rangers had just come in, leading a Mexican as prisoner. He was a sullen-looking fellow, with the dark hair peculiar to his nation, and a malignant look in the depths of his black eyes.

"What have you there, Pardee?" asked the captain.

"Now look yer', captin', said the ranger, who was a Pike county man, "this yer' animal was a-crawlin' round the camp, and my nob and me lit on him purty heavy. Jest ask him whar he was gwine at, will yer'?"

"You did well to bring him in," said the captain. "I thank you for your vigilance, Pardee."

The ranger fell back, with a gratified look on his hard face. Praise for good conduct is pleasing to any one.

"Now, sir," said Lane, turning savagely on the Mexican, "what do you mean by sneaking around my camp?"

The fellow shook his head, and intimated that he did not understand what was said, though the malignant gleam of his eyes told a different story.

"Do you bear me?" cried Lane.

He shook his head again in a violent manner.

"That's a dolge these fellows are all up to," said Elliot. "They never understand our language. That keeps them out of trouble. But that won't save him now. I know the mongrel language too well."

"You talk to him, Ned."

Elliot took the fellow in hand.

"Now, look at me," he said, in good Mexican, "and beware how you lie. What were you doing about this camp?"

"May not a man go where he likes in a free country?" demanded the Mexican, in a sullen tone.

"Be a little careful how you answer my questions," said Ned, his brows beginning to lower. "You may get into trouble. We are not the people to take insolence from men of *your* kind. Why were you sneaking about this camp?"

"And I say the hills are free to all," said the Mexican. "You Americans always seek to do wrong to my race, to whom this land belongs by right, though you took it from us."

"I shall not repeat my question many times more, my fine fellow. You would do a good thing for yourself if you answered at once. Let me tell you that we are Regulators."

"And what is a Regulator?" demanded the Mexican. "Is he not a robber and murderer? Does he not take out men under the blue sky, and hang or shoot them without trial?"

"You lie now. No person ever was hung by the Regulators without trial. Judge Lynch resides. You will learn all about *how* it is done if you do not give a clear account of your presence here."

"But I have done no wrong," said the Mexican.

"You can tell us how and why you came here, at least."

"I came up from the foot-hills."

"Very likely. Now will you tell me what could possibly take a man alone into this region, at night, unless he had important work to do? You can not deceive us. You were sent here."

"I came on my own business."

"What is that business?"

"I will not tell you."

"You will go too far," said Ned, who knew what would follow if the Mexican refused to answer all proper questions. "I tell you that we *must* know your business here, and if you do not tell us, we will cut the truth out of your hide."

"Curse you," said the Mexican, "I will tell you all I can."

"What is your name?"

"Manuel de Castro."

"A name that is familiar to my ears. What relative are you to that old fox who was Governor of California at the time of Fremont's conquest?"

"I am his nephew."

"What takes you so far up the sierras at night?"

"Private business."

"Answer fully and explicitly: what business?"

"I have said I will not tell you, and I say again that I will keep my word. My business is my own, and no one shall make me tell it."

"I am sorry for you," said Elliot. "The boys are very hard on obstinate and suspicious characters. They will find means to *make* you speak."

"By heaven, I will not."

"I think you will change your mind; and, before I tell them what you say, let me beg of you to reconsider your decision, and make up your

mind to tell me what I wish to know. The punishments which the rangers deal out to enemies are fearful. I could not wish any man to endure them, even my worst foe."

"You are trying to frighten me," said the Mexican, turning yellow with fear. "Ha! ha! The idea of trying that on a De Castro."

"Then you refuse to speak?"

"Of course I do. I am not a coward."

"Very good," said Ned, turning to the rangers. "Boys, the fellow is obstinate. I think we had better try to persuade him to speak."

A couple of stout men seized the Mexican. A long lariat was fastened to his joined thumbs, and buckled tightly.

"What are you going to do?" cried De Castro. "Beware how you injure a man of my standing. I will never forget it."

"You have had your choice," replied Elliot. "We mean to have our questions answered. I give you one more chance to speak."

"But what do you intend to do?"

"I intend to make you speak," replied Ned.

"But I swear I will not."

"Just so," said Ned. "Throw the lariat over that limb boys."

A low pine grew upon the mountain-side, shooting out one strong limb further than the rest. A ranger gathered up the loose ends of the lariat, like a lasso, and flung it over this limb, so that one end hung down on the other side. Four men then took hold of the rope, and pulled it taut. The Mexican was led under the tree, and the men pulled away slowly until he rose on tiptoe, his weight bearing entirely on his thumbs. No one but a person who has endured this torture, or seen it inflicted on another, can have any idea of its terrible nature. At first it was nothing, and the Mexican only looked at his torturers with a grim smile. But a moment after his dark face began to work strangely. Nothing earthly could bear the pain which now seemed to shoot along every nerve, and to his very marrow. A hundred rods of fire seemed to run him through. His frame quivered with agony, which he could not much longer endure, and there stood those silent men, pitiless as death, watching his motions closely. Every one of them seemed frozen suddenly into a statue-like calmness.

White terror showed itself in the face of the Mexican, but with heroic fortitude he kept down the cry which pain forced to his lips. At last it broke out in a storm of groans, shrieks and curses, mingled in the strangest way. Now he threatened them with his vengeance in the future. Then he prayed them, for the holy Virgin's sake, to free him from this dreadful punishment. His agony was dreadful. He cursed them in every conceivable way, and they stood there silent, holding the rope, never moving a muscle of their set faces. They were not new to this kind of work; but they knew that it was necessary. Great drops of sweat gathered on the brow of the agonized man. His thumbs were stretched until they seemed about to be pulled from the sockets. The screams and blasphemies were redoubled.

"I do not wish to prolong this," said Ned. "Say that you will tell us what we ask, and I will let you down."

"Let me down then," was the sullen reply.

"Will you promise?"

"Yes; for the holy Virgin's sake, do not keep me here any longer. I am dying."

Ned made a gesture which the men understood. They allowed the rope to slide through their hands, so that the victim's feet could rest upon the ground. But they did not take the strap from his thumbs.

"Now tell me why you were sneaking about the camp."

"I won't!" said the Mexican.

"Run him up, boys," said Ned. "Don't let his feet touch the ground this time."

"Hold!" screamed the Mexican. "As the holy Virgin is over all, I will tell you every thing."

"See that you do. Ease away on him, boys; but the moment he hangs fire, up he goes, mind."

"All right, lieutenant," said one of the men. "We wouldn't think much of wipin' out a Greaser, I guess."

"Now for it," said Ned in Spanish.

"I was sent here," said De Castro.

"Who sent you?"

"The Brothers of the League."

"Who are the Brothers of the League?"

"They are the men you seek. The robbers who have so long made these passes a terror to you cursed invaders."

"By heaven, this is more than I hoped. Why are they called the Brothers of the League?"

"Because they were sworn to keep faith with each other, and to live for nothing but to rob and murder."

"Are you one of them?"

"No."

"Then why did you obey them when they sent you here?"

"Because I dared not do otherwise. They are fierce men, and I was their prisoner. They swore that if I did not go to the camp of the rangers, and find out their number, they would kill me. What could I do?"

"Where did you meet these men?"

"In yonder pass."

He pointed up the mountain.

"Say you so? Then they are very near. Men, take the straps from his thumbs and tie him, hand and foot. When this is done, anchor him to the pine. We shall have him escaping next, if we do not take care."

"Am I not to go now?" asked the Mexican.

"Go! Did you suppose us so verdant as that? I assure you that I do not intend to let you go at all. I do not believe this fine story of yours."

The look which De Castro gave him was fearful in its intensity of rage. Ned laughed.

"Don't look at me in that savage way, Mr. Greaser. You annoy me. I am not used to such things."

"Curse you. The day will come when I will be revenged."

"All in good time," said Ned, coolly.

CHAPTER II.

A RAW RECRUIT.

OBEYING the orders of their superior, the men tied the prisoner firmly to the tree. By this time the moon was up, and several of the rangers laid

down to rest, while a guard was posted about the camp. All at once they heard a stentorian voice, singing:

"Sound the loud trimbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea,
Jehovah has triumphed, his people are free!"

The singer was unmistakably of "Down East" origin. One of the guard stepped out and challenged.

"Who be yew?" demanded the nondescript.
"What's yer name, anyhow?"

"I'll let daylight through you, if yer don't answer," replied the guard. "Who goes thar?"

"Wal, perhaps ye think that's a civil question. Are yew a nat'ral fool, or can't ye see it's *me*?" said Down East.

"And who is 'me'?" demanded the guard.

"Me? I'm Deacon Simpkins's son, Joshua, though they mostly call me Josh. Say, ain't thar an all-fired lot of yew? Darn me if it don't look like a gineral trainin'. Come, don't look so *fetch*ed mad. Hain't I told ye who I be? Ain't that enough, I should like tew know? If ye don't stop p'intin' that thing at my weskit, I shill feel called upon tew go threw yew like a lizard in an eel-trap. Don't, now, *don't!* It ain't a nice thing tew look at."

Laughing, the guard took the mule by the bridle, led him into the light of the camp-fire, and disclosed to the astounded gaze of the rangers as ludicrous a figure as is often seen. A long, lean Yankee, mounted on a mule of such diminutive stature that the heels of the rider, in the words of Barney Rooney of the rangers, "tickled the ground." The Yankee had one of those sallow, demure faces, seen in persons of his class, in which natural cunning seemed to have a tussle with sanctimonious gravity. In one hand he held a long switch, with which he had been belaboring the mule, and in the other a carpet-bag, suited in size to the mule, which did not seem capable of holding anything larger than a pocket-handkerchief. His clothes were old, and evidently had been the property of a small man, for the bottoms of the trowsers aspired to reach his knees, and seemed in a fair way to accomplish the task. He had no arms whatever, and sat his ridiculous mule with a solemn face, bowing gravely to the grinning rangers, who began to gather round.

"Wal," he said. "This looks like *hum*. I guess I'll git down."

He did so, swinging one leg over the head of the mule, and stood there, the picture of native impudence and verdancy.

"Where did *you* come from?" demanded Lane.
"It seems to me that we are fated to be bothered to-night."

"Whar did *I* cum from?" said the Yankee.
"Gosh, don't yew know? I do!"

"Out with it, I say. Where did you come from?"

"Wal, don't be so cholicky about it; I'm from Varmount, I guess. 'Tain't a very large State, but it's heavy on cattle. Say, stranger, don't yew want to swap jack-knives?"

"What?"

"I asked if yew didn't want tew swap jack-knives. Yew've got an all-fired pooty pig-sticker thar, I calculate. That thar would make a man pooty sick if it got intew his gizzard, wouldn't it?"

"You don't answer my question," said Lane, repressing a smile.

"Didn't I? Oh, gosh? What a mighty nice gun yew've got thar, stranger. How will yew dieker for it? I'll sell yew this mule. He ain't very pooty tew look at, and he ain't very big, but he's the gamest little critter ever walked on four legs."

"Do you happen to know who we are?"

"No, I don't, stranger; and yew don't seem none tew ready tew tell me, neither. Darn it, I told my name right eout. I'm Josh Simpkins, and I live down tew Bennington when I'm tew hum. What's your name? or have ye swapped it off?"

"You are the coolest specimen I ever met, even in New England," said Lane. "How did you come here?"

"On a mule. Now jest you look at that mule, and—"

"Dry up!" shouted Lane, thoroughly exasperated, "or I'll break your head. I want you to tell me what you are wandering about the sierras at this time of night for?"

"Ain't *mad*, be yew, captain?"

Lane gritted his teeth.

"'Cause, if ye are, I don't know what I've done tew make yew mad. Darn it all. I was ridin' along on my mule not sayin' nothin' tew nobody, and that darn fool with the gun hauled me up here. Now, jest let me talk tew yew, captain, dew, and I'll tell yew how it happened."

"Talk! I should be pleased to know if you have not been talking all the time."

"*Me?*" cried the Yankee. "Gosh! I can't git in a word. I wanted tew tell yew how I came here. Yew see, I am a Varmount man myself. I hain't been very happy in this life on account of Sary Ann. Yew don't know Sary Ann? Wal, yew lose by it, for I may say she is a very pecooliar female. She's *smart*, I tell yew, but she's got tew much grit, and I—"

"My good friend," said Lane, in despair. "Will you have the goodness to tell me what Sary Ann can possibly have to do with your being here?"

"Don't *you* know? Wal, wasn't I-tellin' ye? Darn it, man, yew fly off the handle tew easy, I think. Stands tew reason, a man can't tell everything in a minnit. Yew jest keep cool and I'll tell yew all about it. Yew see, Sary Ann and me we lived in Varmount. Things was pesky high, and we had hard scratchin' tew git along; and all the time Sary Ann was a-lecturin' *me*. She called me a poor-sperrited critter, and said I hadn't the will nor the brains to support my family."

Here Lane gave a savage look at Ned, who was laughing.

"Wal," continued Simpkins, "she r'iled me so that one day I said tew her:

"If yew don't quit pesterin' me, darned ef I don't go to Californy."

"Sez she, 'Yew hain't got the sperrit.'"

"And with that I picked up my traps and started for San Francisco."

"All right," said Lane, hurriedly. "We've got so far. Don't go back to the States till you have finished your yarn. It's longer than a country road."

"I ain't a-goin' back *yit*," said Simpkins. "My idee is tew have some money before I ever see Varmount ag'in. Wal, when I got to San Francisco it was the darnedest place yew ever did see in all your days. I've been in a heap of places, but I never see'd nothin' to beat it. There's Chinamen there, the queerest critters! And the Chinawomen is wuss than the men. They called me *John*. Now, *John* ain't my name. I told one woman politely my name wa'n't *John*. But, she wouldn't mind me. She kept sayin':

"Me sabby yew weally good, *John*."

"Now, can yew tell me what she meant?"

"She said she knew you very well," said Lane, with a smile.

"Then that kind o' r'iled me up, and I said:

"Yew've made a mistake in the person, Missis China. I ain't the man yew took me for."

"But, she wouldn't listen, an' a lot of 'em got round me, men and women, and darn my buttons if the men didn't want tew dew my washin'!"

"I suppose you make a contract for that by the year," said Lane, glancing at the little carpet-bag.

"Yew git out! It's no sech thing. Did yew ever see sech etarnal outlandish critters as them Chinamen? They've got tails hangin' down their backs as long as my arm. I never did see sech critters. I ran away from 'em at last."

The idea of an innocent Yankee beset by a crowd of Chinamen and women tickled the captain immensely, and he burst into a hearty laugh, which was echoed by the men. As there seemed no possibility of interrupting the interminable tale of the new-comer, the listeners composed themselves to hear it with as good grace as possible.

"I went straight up tew a man that looked as if he was from the States, and asked him ef he knew me. He didn't, sure enough, and then I told him I was from the States, and that I wanted him tew tell me whar they went tew dig gold. He seemed as nice a man as yew ever see in all your life. I kinder cottoned to him in a minnit—he was so smooth and oily-like, jest as ef butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

"Gold?" sez he.

"Yes," sez I. "Whar will I find it? I want tew dig some to-day, and maybe in a week I can git all I want, and go home tew Sary Ann."

"Quite right," sez he. "Thus it is. To-day we flourish, to-morrow we are cut down like the grass that perisheth and dryeth up."

"I know'd he was a good man as soon as he said *that*, and I asked him what meetin'-h'us he preached in. He told me he was a missionary to the Tangaboo Islands, and that he did not care for filthy lucre, and had a mine tew sell. Or, ruther, he wanted me tew give fifty dollars tew the Tangaboo mission, and he'd give me the mine. I thought I couldn't git a better chance, so I told him tew go ahead and show his mine, and if I liked it, I'd buy it. So he took me tew a place whar thar was a long building, like a barn, with a railin' all round it, and high steps goin' up in front.

"What house is that?" sez I.

"That," sez he, "is the 'Ald Adobe,' and

this big place yew see here is my mine. Now, dew yew want tew buy?"

"I couldn't see my way clear to anything better than that, and I calculated that I c'u'd cut this big mine up intew little ones and sell it tew miners. So I hauled out fifty dollars and giv' it tew him."

"Yew will want a shovel," he sez.

"Course I will," sez I.

"All right," sez he. "Give me ten dollars and I'll go and git yew a shovel."

"Ten dollars!" sez I.

"Yes," sez he, kind o' smilin'. "Ten dollars."

"I looked kind o' wild at him, and giv' him the money.

"Yew will want a pickax," sez he. "Very good. I'll git it for yew. Ten dollars more."

"I kinder huffed a little at this, for I didn't like the idee of givin' so much for a pickax, but he told me it was the reg'lar price, and I couldn't git tools as cheap as *he* could, anyhow. So I let him have it and off he went. He cum back pooty soon with a pickax and shovel, and told me that the Tangaboo mission would present me a note of thanks, and make me a life member. Then he went away, and I took up my shovel and began tew work. I noticed that thar was lots of boys cum round the minnit I begun tew dig, and looked wild at me. Bimeby, one of 'em cum up and teched me on the shoulder, and sez he:

"What'n thunder ar' yew a-dewin'?"

"I didn't see that *he* had any call to interfere, so I told him I calculated that wa'n't none of *his* business, and I'd thank him tew git off my land.

"Your land!" he sez. "Dew yew call this *your* land?"

"Yew'd better believe it," sez I.

"And with that he bu'st out a-laffin', and went and said suthin' tew the others, and they luffed as loud as he did. I dug away, but it made me b'ilin' mad tew see 'em a-tramplin' on my s'ile in that way. The ground was pooty hard any way, and I hed tew dig and scrape tew git a little. I knew that was a good sign, and I worked away, while they stood laffin'. Bimeby a feller he cum up, and sez he:

"Earth pooty hard, ain't it?"

"Yaas," sez I.

"Pooty healthy piece of land, tew. Bought it, didn't yew?"

"I reckon I did," sez I.

"Struck anythin' rich *yit*?" sez he.

"No," sez I; "I ain't struck anybody. I ain't a fi'tin' character."

"I thought he was tryin' tew hev me say I'd struck some one, so that he c'u'd take the *law* on me. But he c'u'dn't ketch me that way.

"Pooty soon a man in a blue coat, with a star on his bussum, which I took to be of sum' great fam'ly, cum up and speaks kind o' gruff, and asks me what I was dewin'. That made me mad, and I told 'em all tew git off my land, or I'd take the law of 'em.

"Your land? You fool, this is the *Plaza*, and belongs to the city!"

"No it don't," sez I. "It ain't no more a plaza than I am. Plaza be darned! I bought it this mornin'."

"Bought it! Who from?" sez he.

"From a likelier man than yew will ever be," sez I, as mad as I could be at his confounded nonsense—the Lord forgive me for sw'arin'—and I paid him fifty dollars in good money for it, for the Tangaboo Missionary Fund."

"We've had enough of this foolishness," sez he. "Take your pickax and shovel and go. Yew are getting up a crowd here. We shall have a riot the first thing yew know."

"I won't go," sez I.

"Yew won't?" sez he. "Then I'll make yew."

"So he took me by the collar, and hauled me tew a house with bars on the windows—a hotel, I guess, for I asked him what place it was, and he said, 'The Cross-bar Hotel.' But he'd jest as live lie as not, and likely that wa'n't the name. Wal, he give me a room to sleep in, and it wa'n't no great shakes of a room neither; and in the mornin' he cum and took me out and brought me before an old feller in spectacles, who made me pay ten dollars for defacin' public property, as he called it. And when I talked back and told him I'd be darned if I'd pay it, he made me pay five more for *that*."

"Wal," sez I, "mebbe this is what you call a free country, but I'll be darned if it looks so tew me."

"And then the feller in the blue coat took me out and told me to go about my business. I talked with some fellers about it, and they told me that the old feller was right, and that the place whar I was diggin' belonged tew the city, and the feller that sold it to me was a liar and cheat, and that he hadn't no right tew sell it tew me at all. But one of 'em, a right smart-lookin' chap he was tew, sez tew me that thar wa'n't no gold anywhar near San Francisco, and that I must go out intew the Gulch country and the foot-hills of the Sierras. And he sold me a map of the country, so that I'd know my way, and only charged me ten dollars."

"Let me see your map," said Lane.

The fellow produced a piece of paper, on which some wag had drawn with a pen a chart crossed by lines in various directions, which looked as much like a map as the Yankee did like a courtier.

"I reckon thar ain't no trouble with *that*," said he.

"Not at all," said Lane, dryly. "So you gave ten dollars for this?"

"Yes, I did."

"Was it a good guide?"

"I don't think I rightly understand the d'rections," said the Yankee. "Anyway, I didn't git along very well, and stumbled on this camp by accident."

"Would you like to stay here to-night?"

"As I ain't got no better place tew stay, I don't mind ef I dew."

"Very well. Are you hungry?"

"Yew may bet your life on *that*. I could eat a saw-horse."

The captain conducted him to one of the fires, and gave him the remains of the supper which was in the dishes as they had left it. He ate greedily, pronounced himself satisfied, and laid down to rest, with the little carpet-bag under his head. A hush fell upon the camp, and the rangers slept in peace.

CHAPTER III.

UP THE SIERRAS.

EARLY in the morning Ned called his men. They sprung up, refreshed by the last night's slumber, and prepared for their march. By all they could learn, they must be near the haunt of the robbers who had so long made these mountain-sides a shambles. The Regulators, as they made their preparations, cast anything but loving glances at the Mexican bound to the tree. He lay there sullenly enough, his head sunk on his breast, and his discolored and swollen thumbs lying where he could see them and nurse his anger against the men who had tortured him almost beyond endurance. His grim face, lit by the rising sun, showed angry lines at every point. The Mexican blood is of that temper which keeps a feud until the object of its hate is under the sod forever. The rangers could see that whenever the prisoner raised his head, a savage glance fell upon Ned Elliot, as the man alone to blame for his disgrace and punishment. There was trouble in the look, too. He feared the Regulators might repeat the fearful punishment of the previous night, and he knew that, in the present condition of his hands, he could not endure it for a moment.

The band prepared breakfast, and one of them came to De Castro, loosened his bonds that he might eat, and stood by him with pistols ready, so that, in case of an attempt to escape, he might shoot him down. The Mexican ate in sullen silence, and when he had finished, the ranger bound him again as securely as before, and went back to his own meal. When all had finished, two of the band unbound the cords upon the captive's legs and led him before the officers, who were armed for the march.

"A single question, Senor De Castro," said Ned. "Which do you prefer—to guide us to the place where these robbers are hidden, or endure the punishment of last night until you are ready to do it?"

"I prefer the first. Why should I not guide you there? They are not my friends. True, I have been among them, but was forced to it."

"Then you will guide us?"

"Si, senor."

"I am glad you agree so readily. I assure you, Senor De Castro, that it was painful to us to be forced to punish you as we did last night; but you must consider that our men are being murdered every day, and that we have not been able to find the murderers. Under these circumstances, we must resort to any and every means to find this den of thieves."

De Castro said not a word, but his eyes blazed. It was easy to see that, though he yielded to superior force, he still nursed his hatred of the rangers, and of Elliot especially.

"You will march with us," said the young man, "and lead us by the shortest route to the lair of these mountain pirates. Who is their leader?"

"An American."

"What is his name?"

"Paul Merton."

"He bears a good American name for one who gives up his whole life to the murder of his countrymen. What is he like?"

"He is tall," said the Mexican, "with dark

hair and eyes, and a frame as powerful as that of the captain of this band. In a close encounter he would be more than a match for him. His strength is wonderful. I saw him seize a powerful man by the waist, and raise him over his head like a feather. The man weighed one hundred and sixty pounds. You have some idea from this of the strength of the person you will have to contend with."

"Is he a mere desperado, or a man of sense and courage?"

"He is brave beyond thought, and his cunning is something wonderful. It is impossible to deceive him. He has haunts in a dozen places in these mountains, and shifts them whenever there is danger of being discovered. His spies are everywhere, and he has agents in every camp and village. At this time, perhaps, one of your own men, whom you trust most, is his paid spy."

"It is impossible."

"By no means. I do not say that it is so; but it is strange if it is *not*."

"What is the number of men in the band?"

"It varies. At times, these agents of whom I speak are with him. When they all meet, as they sometimes do, they number one hundred men. But, at most times there are not more than forty in the band. When I left them there was just that number."

"They are strong."

"You are right. I think you will be in the condition of the man of whom you have heard, who went for wool and came home shorn. You are not strong enough for them. They will beat you."

"But, you must make allowance for the fact that my fellows fight in a just cause, while these assassins are under the ban of the law, of which we are the administrators. We have brothers, friends and fathers to avenge. We have a hundred dreadful deeds to remember. Do not for a moment dream that we shall be slack in our duty to California and the memory of our lost friends."

The Mexican said no more, but led the way at a quick pace up the slopes of the Sierras. Evidently he knew the path well, and a smile curled the lip of Elliot as he saw him choose the easiest roads and avoid all obstructions which a stranger to the route would have fallen upon unconsciously. It must not be supposed that the rangers allowed the man to get much in advance: four of them had orders to keep their eyes upon him, and shoot him down if he attempted to escape. But, he appeared to have no such thoughts, and displayed such zeal that the rangers began to think better of him, though Californians and Texans have an utter detestation of the "Greasers," and hate them as only men can hate who have just cause.

The Mexican kept on his course through the rugged passes. Behind him came the rangers, struggling on in Indian file, for the passes would allow no other formation. They were marching in this shape when the head of the line emerged from the pass and appeared in one of those beautiful valleys often found in mountain regions, walled in by mountains on every hand. There could not have been more than three acres of bottom-land in the vale, and this was carpeted

with soft green grass, contrasting strangely with the rugged, gray peaks which rose on every side.

It was one of those silvan spots which nature seems to delight in producing and placing amid savage scenery, like the oases of the desert, more beautiful for the contrast. On the west of this valley a stream rolled down a deep ravine, and plunged from the rocks in a sheet sixty feet in height. From the base of the cliff the little stream crossed the valley, and escaped through one of the passes on the other side. Exclamations of surprise escaped the lips of the rangers, who had never visited this lovely spot.

"Say, Cap," said one of the band, "we camp here, don't we?"

"Yes, Bangor; anything to please the boys. Ned, I don't wonder that you say you would like to live always in California. There is no such scenery as this anywhere in the world. Ask that fellow how far we are from the haunts of these robbers."

Elliot repeated the question.

"It is two miles away," replied De Castro. "Shall we go on now?"

"No," said the captain; "we camp. Tell him so, Ned, and have one of the boys tie him up again. I've no notion of having any one of that kind loose after we have strapped him up by the thumbs. Look out for him, Ned. He bears you no good will, mind you."

"I don't suppose he does, really," said Elliot, laughing. "But, I am foolish enough not to care anything about that. I never was afraid of a Greaser yet."

"It is well enough to guard against them. They are revengeful cusses, every man of them, and think no more of putting a knife into a man than I do of eating my supper; and when you get such a fellow down on you, your strongest suit is to shoot him through the head if he gives you the shadow of an excuse. Billy Mason has got his rifle loaded, and I pity the Mexican if he ever draws a bead on him. What shall we do with our Yankee?"

"I don't know. The fool will not be capable of taking care of himself, and the Piutes will have his scalp in two days if left alone. The only way is to take him along with us. What is he going to do with that mule?"

Simpkins was seen at this moment leading up by the bridle the mule which he had ridden to the camp, turning upon the beast now and then to bestow a word of caution, much after the manner of the clown in the circus. The animal was refractory. He plunged, kicked, reared, and otherwise gave evidence of the possession of an unquiet mind. Yielding at last to the unmeasured abuse which the Yankee heaped upon him, the mule was brought to a stand a few paces from the officers, who were astonished by this hail from the Yankee:

"Say, yew feller in the white hat!"

This was addressed to Ned.

"What do you want?" demanded the lieutenant.

"Want yew," was the answer.

"What do you want of me?" said Ned, good-naturedly, advancing to the place where he stood.

"Wal, I wanted tew know who owns this yer land."

"The Government."

"Same as the city of San Francisco owns my mine?"

"You mean the Plaza."

"Yaas. Didn't I buy it and pay for it in good money? It's enough tew make a good Christian sw'ar tew hear a man talk as yew dew. Wal, s'pose a man was tew take up this land, how long could he hold it?"

"Until the Indians took his scalp," replied Ned.

"Good Lord! Yew don't mean to tell a feller that thar's any Injuns round here?"

"Indians!" said Ned. "They are thicker than locusts. They lie behind every tree and bush we have passed to-day, and if we had been fewer in number we would have had a fight. Burnt Stump, the Piute chief, says he is going to have the next man who comes into the Indian country from the State of Vermont for a roast."

"Oh Lord!" cried the Yankee. "Now *don't* talk that way. Consider a poor man's feelings when you talk. I don't like these Injuns; I never did. I told Sary Ann, when she would have me cum out here, that the Injuns would be after me, sure. But, Lordy! she wouldn't hear a word. I might as well have talked to the saw-mill. Oh, darn my buttons, I wish I had staid tew hum. But, Sary Ann is so all-fired queer that a man *can't* have his own way, never."

"You would have done better to keep out of the Indian country, Mr. Simpkins. It isn't the place for Yankees. The savages are unusually hungry this year, and they say that a good smart Yankee roast makes their hearts strong. I should think it might, but am not sure. Who is that Indian on the mountain?"

"Injun? Whar? I don't see any," cried the Yankee, staring about him in dismay. "Oh, I'm so scared! I wish I was back in Varmount. 'Now I lay me down tew sleep, I pray the—' Whar's that Injun?"

"I guess it was the rock that I saw," replied Ned, with a laugh. "It looks like it now. But, you need not be afraid of Burnt Stump while you stay with us. We will take care of you."

"Say, Mister, don't you want to swap knives?" quoth Josh.

The promise of protection had set his mind at rest instantly, and he was his old scheming self again, eager for a trade.

"No, I don't know that I want to trade with you," said Ned.

"I'm an awful hand at a dicker," said Simpkins. "Yew may go your pile on that. I've got a knife here. Trade, dew. 'Unsign, unseen.'"

"No, thank you," replied Ned. "I'm not in the humor for trading to-day."

"What dew yew say tew buyin' this mule?" persisted Simpkins. "I guess yew won't git a better trade nowhar. Buy him; he's little, but he's got a powerful sight of the trew grit in him. Why, that there mule on'y wants trainin', and he'd make the greatest mule on record—that's what he'd do; it's *in* him. Now, yew buy him; yew be the man tew train this risin' genius. Don't be back'ard about it. I'll sell him cheap—fifty dollars."

"What do I want of the brute, man?" said Ned. "Don't bother me."

"Ain't I a-talkin' for your good? Cum; let's have a bid. I'm bound tew sell that mule somehow. Jest give us a lift. Start her, any way. Say fifty dollars."

"I tell you I don't want your mule, man," said Elliot, good-naturedly. "It would be of no use to me."

"Yew git eout; I know better. That's a useful animile; he kin carry twice his weight. He don't *look* hefty, but he is. Cum; don't hang fire. Say what yew'll give."

"I don't want him," replied Ned.

"Well, yew are the wu'st man tew trade with I ever see. But, if yew won't trade, yew won't, so thar's an end of the matter. I guess I'll go and talk tew the men. *They'll* trade, I guess."

He went away, dragging his reluctant steed by the bridle, and looking daggers at the man who would not trade. He was soon engaged in conversation with his former captor, who was listening, open-mouthed, to his veracious account of the performances of that wonderful mule. By his report, his like for endurance, sagacity, speed, and all the qualities which go to make up a good mule, had never been seen. The unapproachable cheek with which he told his story was too much for the unwary rangers, and they looked closely at the mule, trying to discover where his remarkable powers were concealed. Before half an hour had passed, the Vermonter had effected a sale, for the sum of sixty dollars, which he buttoned securely in his pocket. This done, he felt at ease. He had effected a *trade*; he had done a good deed in *doing* a fellow-man.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WONDERS OF THE VALLEY.

It was past noonday when the rangers entered the valley and pitched their camp upon the level ground beside the running stream. The orders of the camp were imperative. There was to be no rifle discharged on any pretext, for the haunt of the robbers was said to be close at hand. The Mexican declared that it would not do to advance until later in the afternoon, because so many of the robbers were out on the hills throughout the day, and would be apt to give the alarm. They yielded quietly to this judgment, which seemed good, and waited. While the band prepared something to eat, the captain and Elliot set out on an exploring trip through the valley. The mining excitement at this time was at its hight, and as they passed along the little stream, Lane stooped and scraped up a handful of sand from the bottom, and rubbed it with his finger to see if he could feel any particles of gold. Satisfied that he did, he washed the handful in the river, picked out the coarser gravel, blew out the sand, and saw quite a number of fine particles of the precious metal in the palm of his hand. But the earth did not betray any partular richness, and he tossed the shining "dust" away.

"Is it rich?" said Ned.

"Not very," said the captain; "but in my opinion the place is not far off where there is a rich deposit, if we could only strike it."

While he spoke, Elliot was kicking at something which protruded from the earth at his feet. A moment's labor and it came out upon the turf, and both saw what it was—the thigh-bone of a man! A thrill of awe ran through the frame of the young officer. There was something solemn in the sight of that whitened bone. Who was he? How came he to die? Was he one of those nameless adventurers who had visited the Golden State, and had fallen victims to starvation? Who could tell? A little further on they found the rest of the skeleton,

"A grinning, ghastly, and horrible thing,"

lying with its white face turned up to the summer sky, with a rusty rifle lying by its side. Elliot touched the skeleton with his foot, and something rattled within the frame. He turned it over, and a leaden bullet rolled out from between the ribs.

"This looks queer," said the captain. "No Indian did this. It is the work of a white man."

"You are right, Captain Lane; a white man did this deed. We'll leave the poor fellow where he lies, and when we go back we will send some of the men to bury it. No Christian man would have left the body so long exposed to the sun. Come on."

Their course took them by the side of the stream, which flowed on as tranquilly as though no murder had been done upon its banks. Their path was stopped at last by the mountains, through which the stream ran by a mere rift in the rocky wall. They turned back, and, skirting the base of the mountains, walked toward the camp. All at once a deep groan, which seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, rose to their startled ears. Ned held up his hand, and Lane stopped. The groan was repeated.

"Who is that?" cried Ned.

"Whoever you are," replied the owner of the voice, "ask no questions, but go back as you came. Put miles and miles between you and this place, whitened as it is with dead men's bones."

"Where are you?" said Lane. "Show yourself, or by the heavens above our heads, the rangers shall find you out."

A hollow laugh was the reply, and the monotonous voice went on:

"Who can tell the secrets of the Sierras? Who can make way into its depths but those who know the clew? I speak to you from the earth, and I speak as one having knowledge. Be warned in time. You cannot tell the fate in store for you. A dismal death awaits all who enter this valley, and will not take warning from what they see and hear. It is a Golgotha. Do not remain. Set your faces westward, and go back whence you came."

Lane looked at Ned in astonishment, and for a moment his stout frame quivered like an aspen leaf. But it was over in an instant. He was not the man to lose his courage. He was simply shocked. Recovering his composure, he cried out:

"Come out and face us!"

"I do not come for that purpose," replied the

solemn voice. "I am here in good faith to warn you of the death which will come to you if you remain in Murderer's Canyon."

"Of what do you warn us?"

"Of danger."

"Of what kind?"

"Danger unto death. When you lie down at night, you do so not knowing that you will ever see the dawning. Your bones will whiten with those which you saw to-day."

"I do not fear that," said Lane.

"False! You tremble now; and yet you have a brave heart. Many eyes have been on you since you left the mines with your band, Adam Lane. Everything you have done has been known to the men you seek almost as soon as done. Take warning from me, who speak for your good, and who know what is said to be the truth. There is gold enough in the hills below without seeking it here."

"We do not seek gold," replied Lane.

"What then?"

"Revenge."

"For what?"

"For the death of the men who have been our friends for years, and who fell victims to the infernal rapacity of the bloody band infesting these mountains."

"You cannot avenge them."

"We can try."

"You will lose your own lives."

"We have taken the risk."

"Turn your eyes upon the sun. It is a beautiful day. The very hills are bathed in glory. The light gleams upon the river. Most men who love beautiful things would wish to live to enjoy such a world as this. And yet you madly rush into danger which will surely end fatally to most, if not all your party."

"I have brave men under me, who do not fear death," replied Lane.

"Who are you that warn us?" said Ned, speaking for the first time.

"You cannot know," said the voice.

"Then we do not believe you," said Ned.

"As you will," said the voice. "What I have said I have said. Be warned in time, and farewell."

Both these men were brave. They had confronted danger in a hundred ways, but never, in all their experience, had they encountered anything like this. They faced a wall of solid rock, whence the voice came which warned them. There was no clew. In spite of their strong hearts, they recoiled from that dreadful place.

"You begin to feel that I speak the truth," said the voice. "Send for your men. Let them search for me and see what they find. I repeat, the secrets of the sierras are many and strange."

"I begin to think so," muttered the captain. "But we will take you at your word. Sound your bugle, Ned. Not too loud."

Ned lifted a small bugle which he always carried to recall his men when he needed them, and sounded it a certain number of times. The rangers rose in a body; a detachment of ten of them ran toward the officers. Among the rest came Josh, eager to have a hand in anything new. His long legs took him over the ground with a speed that rivaled that of all others,

"What's the matter?" he asked. "What'n thunder made them fellers run? What did yew toot on that little horn for? What'll ye take for it? Trade for a knife, eh?"

Five questions in one sentence, and an offer to trade at such a moment was too much for the captain.

"You fool!" said Lane.

"Oh, don't git mad now, captin'," returned Josh. "I didn't speak tew yew. I asked the young feller how he'd trade fer the little horn. I'd like tew toot on it myself. I think I could dew it. I used tew blow on a horn for the cows tew hum. Don't yew want to hire a tooter? Save your own wind, yew know. I'll work low."

The captain pushed him roughly aside just as the men came up. He issued his orders with fierce vehemence.

"Up those rocks, boys, and see if you can find any ore concealed there. It is impossible for the fellow to escape. Search every corner. He must be there. I'm with you."

They sprung up the rocks together. As they did so, an unearthly laugh seemed to issue from the soil beneath their feet—a dismal sound, at which the men paused in blank dismay and looked downward. Josh Simpkins had followed them part way up, but, hearing that sound, he leaped down and scuttled away a convenient distance from the rocks.

"Gosh all fish-hooks!" he cried. "What was that?"

"Search, men, search!" cried Elliot, cheerfully. "The fellow is concealed somewhere near at hand."

"I'll swear that laugh came from under my feet," said one of the men.

"All imagination, Taylor. Look sharp. We shall have him bolting out pretty soon."

The laugh was repeated, sounding more dismal than ever.

The Regulators began to look terrified, and cast anxious glances toward their captain. The search was fruitless, and the men descended the rocks willingly enough, for their investigations had been accompanied by groans and laughter throughout. Like all backwoodsmen, they were superstitious. They had heard the wild Indian legends, and believed them. Certainly, what they had heard and seen was enough to puzzle minds more evenly balanced than their own. They went back to the camp, and the captain and Elliot remained near the rocks. Josh Simpkins lingered not far away.

"How do you explain this?" said Elliot.

"Now, look you, Ned Elliot," said Lane, solemnly, "I have been bred to despise all these late new-fangled spiritual manifestations; but, I give you my word, that I begin to feel that spirits of the dead hover hereabouts. A voice is heard coming out of the solid rock, warning us away. We search everywhere and can find nobody. I am puzzled."

"So be I," said Josh. "Dew yew think it's a ghost?"

"You ought to make a trade with it," said the captain.

"I don't see any chance," replied Josh. "But if that ain't a ghost, I'm a sinner. Gosh! Didn't it groan! I thought my time had come,"

"It has. The same voice informed me that we should all have our throats cut before mornin'."

"Oh, git eout; foolin', ain't ye?"

"Not at all; I'm in no humor for fooling. If you don't believe me, go close to the rock and ask the ghost any questions you like, and it will be sure to answer."

Josh approached the spot with hesitating steps, evidently not at all admiring the situation. The solemn stillness which now reigned everywhere struck a nameless terror into him, and when he spoke his voice had an unmistakable quaver in it.

"Say!"

There was no reply.

"Mr. Ghost!"

Still no answer.

"Mrs. Ghost!"

The rocks only gave back the sound of his voice, and he looked back at Tommy to see if it was not a sell.

"Miss Ghost!" he went on to say. "Gosh; that's all the family, unless its a boy ghost, and objects to being 'mistered.' Say, ain't yew goin' tew speak?"

"What do you want?" said the voice, so suddenly and so near that the Yankee leaped from the ground.

"I want tew speak tew yew."

"Say on."

"Did yew say that we would all get our throats cut 'fore mornin'?"

"It may be so."

"But, Mr. Ghost, don't that seem rather harsh, so tew speak? Ain't it carryin' a joke tew fur?" Now I like a joke as well as anybody, but darn a joke that goes tew fur. Yew ar' foolin', ain't yew?"

"Take warning, vain man. Leave this place, and never again set foot in its unhallowed precincts. There is death in the air you breathe. I have warned your officers, I now warn you. Turn your steps toward the villages and never again be seen in the foot-hills of the sierras."

"That's yewr delib'rit opinion, is it, mister?" asked the Yankee.

"It is."

"Now, what's the use of your bein' so ornery? What good is this place tew yew? Can ghosts eat or drink or dig gold? Course they can't! It's ag'in' all reason that they should, and a good-natured ghost wouldn't act so darned ornery as yew dew. He'd let a feller stay here."

"Irreverent man, away!"

"Jest as yew say. Of course, yew have a priory right, so tew speak, a sort of lien on the land, and if yew say go, we'll dew it, though it ain't quite clear to my mind that yew hev got the law on your side."

"Begone, I say!"

"Ain't I goin'? Don't hurry a man. Yew can't say I hain't behaved like a gentleman. Say, how dew yew like it, as fur as yew've got?"

A shriek broke from the heart of the mountain; Josh put his fingers in his ears and fled. The captain and Elliot followed more slowly. They found the men collected in knots, eagerly discussing the strange event. The Mexican, bound as usual, was listening to the conversa-

tion of a party near him, with a derisive smile on his face. He evidently was much pleased at the turn affairs had taken. At least, so thought Elliot, as he saw his face.

CHAPTER V.

THE STORY OF MURDERER'S CANYON.

THE scornful smile of the Spaniard made Ned angry. He approached De Castro and demanded what he meant by bringing them to that place, and what he knew of it.

"Did not the senor order me to lead him by the nearest route to the haunt of the Brothers of the League?"

"I did," said the young man. "You have not done so."

"Give me the word to do so, and in half an hour you shall be at their very door. I told you we were not far away. But, if you will take my advice, you will not go there yet."

"The warning voice of these precincts has told us that we must not stay, and that the band know all about our coming. What do you make of that?"

"*Madre de Dios!* Is it possible that you have heard THE VOICE?"

"It is true. I am satisfied you know all about it. Inform me quickly of the secret of this place, or I will find a means to make you do it."

"Senor Americano," said the Mexican, in a tone which left no doubt of the truth of what he said, "if you were to trice me up by the thumbs for a week I could tell you nothing about it, because I *know* nothing. I only know that there is a secret connected with Murderer's Canyon. I only know that it is a fearful mystery, and that many have lost their lives in attempting to unravel it. You heard the voice?"

"Yes."

"Did it warn you?"

"It did."

"Then, Senor Americano, as you hope to live, as you wish to save the lives of your men, leave this valley forever. No one has heard the warning voice and remained here long without meeting some horrible death. Would you like to hear the story of Murderer's Canyon?"

"Yes."

"You shall hear it, senor. It earned the name while the Spanish race held ascendancy in California, as they should do now, and shall do again. This romantic place was the scene of a fearful tragedy. There lived, at that time, on the western slope of the mountains, a rancho named De Castro—a relative of mine. He had a daughter, who was regarded as the most beautiful woman in the mountain region of California—a glorious woman, one born to sway all hearts. Many suitors sought her hand, but she was cold to all save to one, and that one a dependent—a herdsman of her father. He had one vindictive rival, a cousin of Julia's, a hot-blooded youth, jealous of all who looked with eyes of love at the charming girl. The herdsman, Gonsalvo, was a handsome man, with dark eyes, full of the fire of the Moorish race, whence he sprung; dark, curling hair, and a face almost feminine in its mold. Julia loved him, and when her father would have

forced a union with her cousin, she fled with her lover, and they were married by a priest of the Franciscan order. Then Gonsalvo, who knew the mountains by heart, took her to this secluded spot, where he built the cabin you see in ruins yonder. There they lived together. They were happy. The mountains gave them food enough. Yonder, on the eastern side of the valley, he planted a little field of corn, and this gave them bread. Julia never spoke with regret of the luxuries of her father's house, and was happy with her husband. So they passed a year, and a child was born—a girl. Gonsalvo was happier than ever, and he worked the harder to make himself rich for her sake. There was gold in the valley, and he knew it; and all through that year he had been toiling to amass wealth. He succeeded, and told Julia that before another winter came, they would leave their retreat, and go forth rich enough to oppose all their enemies. He showed her the pile of glittering dust he had heaped up since they had come to the valley.

"One day he was out on the mountain hunting, and while there, he was seen and recognized by one whom he would not have met for the world. It was the servant of that cousin who had loved Julia. Gonsalvo did not see him, and the servant rode off at full speed to inform his master, who had scoured the country far and wide to find the fugitives. But, all trace of them had been lost, and but for the unfortunate accident which brought Pedro up the mountain in search of some stock which had strayed he might never have seen them again. That night Gonsalvo was unusually merry. He played with his little daughter, and told his dear wife how happy they should be when they had returned to Spain. That night De Castro and a number of his men surrounded the cabin and called to Gonsalvo to come out. He barricaded his door and fought all night, and when they broke down the door and overpowered him, only three were left, and one of these was the cousin. They bound Gonsalvo, and dragged him out into the open air, and with him Julia and the shrieking infant, who was appalled by the fierce looks of these bloody men. They bound Gonsalvo to a tree and gathered fuel. Then Julia knew that, excited by the loss of their friends, they meant to adopt the Indian custom and burn him at the stake. She threw herself at the feet of De Castro, and begged on bended knees, that he would spare her husband. But he was relentless as fate itself. He had sworn that if he ever met Gonsalvo he would kill him. The blood of the latter was up, too, and, bound as he was, he reviled the villain with his bitterest words. He told them that they were murderers and that they were cowards. He dared De Castro, by every opprobrious term at his command, to loosen his hands, and fight him with any weapon he might name, but called down the vengeance of Heaven upon him if he did any wrong to Julia or the child.

"You lie when you say I dare not meet you," said De Castro. "I will fight you now."

"Let it be so," said Gonsalvo; "the best man shall win. What shall be the weapons?"

"Rifles."

"The distance?"

"Forty paces."

"The rules?"

"To fire between the words *three* and *five*."

"I could not ask any better terms," said Gonsalvo.

"They set him at liberty and gave him his rifle. He loaded it carefully, like one who was used to the work. They took their places. At the word 'one' they raised their pieces and as 'two' passed the lips of the man who was counting the rifle of De Castro exploded. Gonsalvo, shot through the heart, bounded into the air, and when the body struck the earth it was a corpse.

"Julia threw herself upon the body with a single agonized scream, and clasped him in her arms. She kissed the dead lips, and tried to stanch the blood bubbling from the breast. But, she tried in vain. Those lips never would speak to her again. Whether the rifle of De Castro exploded by accident or whether he intentionally fired before his time, is not known. Julia knelt by the side of her husband, unheeding the cries of the child, which had crawled to her side. A wild light came into her eyes, and she rose to her feet. De Castro was leaning on his rifle, very pale, and he turned paler yet as he caught the flash of her eye.

"Are you satisfied, Miguel De Castro?" she said.

"Why not?" he answered. "I swore to kill him, and I did it. Now you shall be mine."

"I have but one husband, and he is now in heaven, where you can never go. Come hither, Gomez," she said, addressing one of the men. "You once said you loved me, and I did not scorn your love, though I did not marry you. Seest thou the child? It is mine. Its father is dead. I want a man to promise to take care of it as his own. Wilt thou do it?"

"The Virgin aiding me, I will," said Gomez. "But, will you not sorrow to part from it?"

"She caught the child up in her arms and kissed it many times in a rapid, eager way.

"Little one," she said, "I loved thee dearly. But, the fates have it that we must part. Take her then, good Gomez, and may God deal with you as you deal with her!"

"That is enough folly," said De Castro, who had regained his self-possession. "We must away to my ranch."

"She looked at him in a strange way and again knelt by the body, kissing the lips.

"I bid thee farewell, Gonsalvo. Liest thou there, loved one, cold and dead? Wait on the border of the river, and my soul shall join thine in thy flight. See, he smiles!"

"It was a strange fancy, but a smile seemed actually to dwell on the face of the dead.

"Come with us," said De Castro. "Remember, Julia, that I did this in love of you."

"Where would you have me go?" she said, in a strange tone. "Would you let him lie there alone?"

"He shall be buried. My men will see to that," said De Castro.

"And this was done in love, Miguel De Castro?"

"It was."

"And you would have me come into your

house, before my husband's blood has dried into the earth?"

"Do as thou wilt; I will have you for my wife. Will you come to my arms willingly or by force?"

"You wish my answer now?"

"Yes."

"Take it, then," she cried.

"There was a dagger in De Castro's belt. As she spoke, she seized it and stabbed him to the heart. He reeled and fell dead beside the body of the man he had murdered. She stood for a moment looking at him, to be sure her work was well done, and then turned the point of the weapon against her own breast and before they could interfere it had gone home to the very hilt. She staggered to the side of her husband, drew the weapon from the wound, and fell upon the corpse of Gonsalvo. When they ran to lift her she was dead. They buried the husband and wife in one grave, under the pine trees yonder, took the board of gold which Gonsalvo had gathered, and returned, bearing with them the child. Gomez took his share of the plunder, and left his companion, who has never seen him since. That is the story of Murderer's Canyon."

"A strange tale. Is there no sequel?"

"There is. Since that day they say that the ghost of the dead Gonsalvo haunts this spot, and warns all who enter it away. His prophesies always are true, for, sooner or later, any one so warned is murdered here."

"And that is the way it received the name?"

"Si, senor."

"There is some jugglery here," said Ned. "I do not claim fully to understand what it is, but there is jugglery for all that. I live in a country where we do not believe that disembodied spirits walk the earth."

"You know best what you heard, senor. I never have heard the voice."

"But you believe it?"

"I have heard it from lips which never deceived me," replied the Mexican. "I think it must be true."

"And who are they who commit the crimes which give the name to Murderer's Canyon?"

"How should I know?"

"Is it the Brothers of the League?"

"It may be."

"But do you know?"

"I do not."

"Who told you the story of this place?"

"Pedro, the sole survivor of the struggle, with the exception of Gomez and the child."

"Where is this Gomez?"

"Senor, for sixteen years his friends have never seen his face. It is known only that he took the child and the gold and fled. Gomez was a strange man always. He was learned in many tongues, but for some crime of which he never spoke, had fled from Mexico and taken service with De Castro as *vaquero*. I do not know why he came; but he is gone."

"Then the child would be seventeen years of age now?"

"Si, senor."

"I should like to see the graves," said Elliot.

"If you will loosen my feet I will show you the place."

Ned stooped and removed the cords as requested, and the Mexican rose to his feet. Ned touched the hilt of his pistol in a significant manner. The Mexican nodded, to imply that he understood the threat. He led the way to a grove of low pines near the eastern base of the mountains, and there showed Ned a number of little mounds scattered here and there, one wider than the others.

"Here," said De Castro, pointing to the grave on which his foot rested, "lie the remains of Miguel De Castro, who fell a victim to a fruitless love. The three graves on the left are those of his servants, who were killed in trying to break into the cabin, and in the large grave the husband and wife are at rest."

"You speak as if you felt for them."

"I do. Julia was my cousin, and only sixteen when she died, younger than her daughter would be now, poor girl! Besides, they were all Mexicans."

"Where was the cabin?"

"On yonder slope. Nearly all the logs have crumbled into dust, at least what was left of them, for the men burned it as well as they could before they left."

"Strange, indeed. You may wonder at it, but I, who am not of your blood, feel sincere pity for the young wife who so terribly avenged her husband's death."

"You do? Sympathy is cheap, but what care the dead for that? It cannot change the repose of their souls. They are at rest long since, thanks to the holy saints. But it is time for us to be on our way, if we would reach the haunt of the robbers in time to attack them to-night."

"I do not know whether such a plan is a good one. I will speak to the captain."

"Has the heart of the senor failed him?" asked De Castro, in a sarcastic tone.

"By no means, my worthy friend," replied the young man. "I have no intention of retreating. But, what we have heard to-day makes a change of plan somewhat necessary."

They returned to the camp. The Mexican went back to his bonds, and Elliot drew the captain aside.

"Lane, I mistrust that Mexican. I believe he means to lead you into some ambush. But shall we keep him, or try to get on without him?"

"I don't see how we can. If we set him free, he will be sure to let the scoundrels know all about us."

"I did not mean to let him go, but to keep him a prisoner and trust no more to his guidance. By the way, what if he were a member of the gang, after all?"

"It may be; but I hardly think it. To be sure there is no truth in a Greaser, whatever, and he may be lying to us; it is in the breed. But I think we had better keep him, and watch him more closely. He will at least lead us near the robbers, and all we ask is to get them within arm's-length."

"Shall we go on to night?"

"I don't think it best to do so. We can tell better in half an hour. If it rains, as I fear it will, it will not be policy to leave the valley, for there would not be time for a fight."

The half-hour passed, and heavy clouds began

to roll up the base of the mountain, and the dense fog enveloped them on every side. The men found shelter, until the rain was over, under the protecting ledges.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MARCH.

At early morning the rain had ceased, and they proceeded on their way, the sullen Mexican taking the lead, with the captain on one side and Ned on the other, each with his hand upon the hilt of a pistol, ready to use it at a moment's warning. The fellow glanced nervously from side to side as they proceeded, well knowing that any sign of treachery on his part would be the signal for his death. The stern, set faces of the men on either side boded little good to him if he dreamed of betraying them.

The clouds had passed away, and all the glory of the mountain summer fell upon the hills. The peaks were crowned with the rays of the rising sun. Through the deep defiles, up steep ascents, through low growths of bushes, they made their way, and at last emerged upon the summit of a lofty ridge, which presented a strange appearance, high above the rank vegetation of the foot-hills. The grass was changing under the summer sun, and the bear rocks lifted their heads on either side.

"Gosh!" said Josh Simpkins, "if this ain't an all-fired cur'us sort of place, I'm a sinner."

"Why have you brought us here?" demanded Lane.

"Because this is the only way to the haunt of the robbers," replied De Castro.

"Forward, then," cried the Regulator. "We have work to do."

The band advanced at a quick pace, and went after the Mexican to a narrow opening in the mountain-side, through which they must pass. As they neared this opening, a light step was heard, and a woman came out into the open space.

Such a woman! In all of his wanderings, Ned Elliot could remember nothing half so beautiful. Her dark hair was unconfined, and allowed to sweep in heavy masses about her form of faultless symmetry. Her dress was simple, and adapted to the region in which she lived. A short kirtle, reaching to the knee, Turkish trowsers, fastened by a silver buckle at the dainty ankle, and moccasins. On her head she wore a Scotch "bonnet," with a waving feather. A belt was girded about her slender waist, supporting a pair of pistols. In her hand she carried a light and beautifully made carabine, which she threw forward with her thumb upon the lock the moment the band appeared in view.

"Halt!" she cried.

The rangers looked at her in utter bewilderment. Who was this woman? Whence did she come? Females then were scarce enough in California, especially beautiful ones, and this was a rare type of human loveliness. There was language in every motion of her body, her lip and her eye. The captain advanced, but the ringing voice stopped him.

"Stand back!" she cried.

"Who are you?" said the captain. "Do not delay us. We have much to do."

"Think you that I am ignorant of your mission? You are mistaken. You come to destroy the Brothers of the League. Turn back, then. You are not the ones fated to become famous by rooting out the men of the mountain league. I bid you all turn back if you would live."

"We are not men to be frightened," replied Lane. "When my men took up the rifle for the spade, they meant work. They meant to destroy the murderers who infest the foot-hills, and they will do it."

"They will never see that day," replied the girl. "You tread upon a mine. Danger is about you on every hand; death lurks in every rock and tree. I have humanity enough to wish to save life. Do not go on."

"By Heaven, we will," replied the captain. "Nothing shall turn us."

"Something shall, as you will find to your cost. You have been warned once. This is the second warning."

"How know you we have been warned?" demanded Elliot.

"No matter; go back to the mines. For the wickedness which makes these hills a shambles, I am as grieved as you are; but the time is not yet to stay the bloody tide."

While she was speaking, her eyes rested from time to time upon the face of the Mexican with an intent look, while he did not seem to notice her. She came nearer, so that the guide was within reach of her arm. The men, spellbound, gazed at the beautiful vision with wondering eyes. While they gazed, she drew a knife and severed, at a single cut, the bonds which confined the arms of De Castro, and he was off like an arrow from a bow, followed by a pistol-shot from Lane. Before they had time to think, the girl also was gone, disappearing like a dream. The moment she turned to fly, Lane reached out his hand to grasp her, and received a cut across the back of it with the knife, which caused him to loosen his hold and draw back with an angry exclamation.

"After her, Ned!" he cried. "If she escapes, the fat is in the fire."

Five or six of the Regulators started in pursuit. The pass was narrow, allowing only two men to go abreast. Down the pass went the two officers, until they were brought up on the bank of a yawning gulf, thirty or forty feet wide, the lower part of which was veiled in complete darkness. But, neither girl nor Mexican was anywhere in sight. They had disappeared, but whither? Was it possible that they had fallen into this abyss? Not probable, for the girl had come from that pass. They had a hiding-place somewhere, but where that was, none could tell. Even as they stared at one another in stupid amazement, a clear, musical laugh came from the very earth beneath their feet.

"Curse it!" said Lane, "what has come to the foot-hills? They used to be decent, respectable mountains, but who could stand such nonsense as all this? Let us get back to the men."

They hurried back to the mouth of the pass, where they found the rangers huddled together, silent as the grave, with dismayed looks. They were brave men. Either would have dared an encounter with a grizzly bear, a Blackfoot chief, or a robber, and crowed over his performance

in that line. But, fighting shadows was not in their province. Who was this woman who had come so suddenly and disappeared as soon?

"I say, Cap," said a burly fellow, as their officers appeared, "I don't like this, I don't."

"Neither do I, Burt. The mischief is to pay. We have lost the Mexican, and have no clew to the haunt of the robbers. I wish we had shot him."

"But, I say, Cap," persisted the man called Burt, "does yer think that thar woman was a human?"

"Why, Burt? Of course I do."

"She mought be, and then ag'in she moughtn't. I opine thet she ain't. It don't stand to reason that any human c'ud go through a solid rock, and it 'pears like thet she did; darn my hide ef she didn't."

"Pshaw, Burt, nothing of the kind."

"Whar be she then?"

"That I can't tell. You don't suppose the Mexican was a ghost, do you?—and he is as completely hidden as the girl."

"Thet's so, Cap," said the man, brightening. "He wa'n't a ghost, sure; for he hollered right peart when we put the straps on his thumbs. But whar hev they gone? Can any one tell?"

"No, Burt. There is one other thing to prove that this wasn't a ghost. She used a knife to cut the cords on that Mexican's hand. A ghost wouldn't have needed a knife to do that."

"Right ag'in," said Burt, completely relieved. "Then it stands to reason thet ef we hev to fight, we won't hev to fight anything but humans. I'm right glad of that, I am. You know George Burt, don't yer? He's a hoss from old Kentuck. He ain't afraid of no man thet ever put his foot in a moccasin. Thet's his gait, thet is; but, ghosts am't my kind. I'll fight a grizzly sooner. Say, Cap, when are we goin' to wade into these yer' scalpers? I want to, anyhow. I'm jest sp'ilin' for a fight, I am. Can't we raise a muss, somehow?"

"I shouldn't wonder, Burt. But, first, we must find where the men are we have got to fight."

"Right enough, Cap. Let's find 'em then."

"I intend to. You, Peters and Willis, must go forward and see if you can discover any trace of the miscreants. The moment you do so, return to us."

"Thank you, Cap. You know what a man wants, you do. Come along, boys. We'll find 'em, we will."

The rest of the band went back a little way on the platform, loaded their rifles, and sat down to wait for the return of the scouts, who entered the dark pass. They were three of the best men in the band—men who had fought Indians of every tribe, and the notches on whose rifle-stocks told of many scalps they had taken in their bard-fought battles. It must be remembered that the bordermen of the West then had and still have many peculiarities borrowed from the Indians. They are as ready to take scalps as the savages themselves. The men entered the pass with their weapons ready. Burt was the leader. They reached the brink of the precipice, and paused, for they could go no further.

"Dang me if this ain't queer," said Burt, stooping down to look into the black depths. "I wonder whar they could hev crossed?"

"Mebbe they fell in," said Peter. "I hope the handsome gal didn't. She was a crusher, she was."

The Californian is great on accent. The most unimportant sentences, by their peculiarities of emphasis, become significant. These men have many expressions entirely their own. When at a loss for a word, they coin one to suit their taste.

"We can't git over, can we?" said Burt.

"See yer'," said the man called Willis, a light-built, active fellow. "I kin go over thar like a book, I kin."

"Whar?" said Burt.

"Don't you see the rocks on the side of this canyon are rough? I'll cross over, jest to show yer that the thing kin be did."

"That's all right," said Peter. "We want ter see yer go acrost thet thar gulch. Yer kain't do it."

"Yes I ken, Dick Peters. I ken do it jest as easy. Now look yer!"

The chasm only ran across the canon, and then ceased abruptly. The sides were of quartz, which was irregular in conformation, leaving slight footholds for the hands and feet. Willis, grasping at these projections, began to cross. But, the moment his feet struck the rocks, a voice called out:

"Stop thar!"

"Thet thar's no ghost, anyhow," said Burt.

"Wal, stranger, what mought you want?"

"Thet thar chap hed better not try to cross."

"Why?" said Burt.

"Cause he'll git hurt. I opine it ain't healthy for no man to try to cross thet thar gulch."

"Whar be yer?" said Burt.

"Don't yer know?" replied the unseen owner of the voice.

"No," replied Burt.

"Then I ain't goin' ter tell yer. All I ken say is, yer hed all better git back out'n this."

While this conversation was going on, Willis was slowly working his way across the gulch, hanging by his finger-nails and toes. He counted on crossing while the others were in conversation, but he was watched.

"Manuel!" said a deep voice.

"Si, senor," replied a voice which they knew, though they could not see the owner, as that of the Mexican, De Castro.

"Where are your arrows?" demanded the deep voice.

"Here, senor."

"Shoot that fellow on the rocks; he will not take warning. His obstinacy will lose him his life."

A bowstring twanged, and an arrow struck the rock within an inch of the head of Willis. He at once commenced a hasty retrograde movement, and had nearly reached the brink of the precipice in safety, when an arrow struck him in the arm. The wound, in itself, was of a trivial nature, but the hand of Willis relaxed its hold for a moment, his feet slid from the fragment on which they rested, and he dropped. But, in falling, his active right hand grasped a projecting knob of quartz near the spot where

his feet had stood. Forgetting the wound, he threw up his left hand and grasped another point of rock, and began to feel for another resting-place for his feet. But at this point the quartz was unusually smooth, and he hung dangling between heaven and earth just out of reach of his friends.

"Stop firing," said the stern voice they had before heard. "If he can escape now, by heaven he shall."

Even in his great peril, Willis had time to whisper to Peters:

"Them voices are down in the gulch. Kain't yer help me, boys?"

"Hold on a minnit," replied Burt. "I'll save yer."

He turned and rushed back to the rangers' camp. All sprung up in surprise as he dashed in, with a flushed and excited face, and snatching a lariat from the saddle-bow of the wonderful mule, darted away again. Several of the rangers followed him, and saw the cause of his haste. As he ran, he formed a noose at the end of the lariat, and had it ready by the time he reached the brink.

"Hang on half a minnit longer, old boy," he said. "I'll save yer, I will."

"I'm all right," said Willis, who had wonderful endurance. "What yer goin' ter do?"

"Ken yer hold on with one hand, and pass this yer' under yer shoulder with the other?" said Ben.

"You bet yer," replied Willis, detaching his wounded left hand from the rock. "Toss that noose over my head."

Burt gathered up the lariat, made the noose wide, and threw it over the head, as required. Willis passed his left arm through it, and shifted his entire weight to that arm. The pain must have been intense, but he hung on until able to draw himself up and get his right arm through the loop, which was now drawn tight under his arms.

"Take hold thar, all of yer," he shouted. "I'm a-goin' ter jump onter that ledge under yer feet."

The men seized the rope; the brave fellow let go his hold and leaped. His feet struck the ledge at which he aimed, but slipped off again, and he was held by the strong arms of the men above. The next moment he was on the platform of the pass, panting for breath, but triumphant. His friends gathered about him and shook hands heartily.

"Thar, thar, boys, that's all right. We ain't goin' to waste our time about this yer'. We've got to look fer these yer' skunks. And they're thar; I know it."

"Whar?" demanded one of the men.

"Down thar," replied Willis, pointing into the cavity. "Didn't I hear 'em? Didn't they shoot arrers at me? Look at this yer' one in my arm."

Two or three men ran to the edge of the chasm and looked down. But they could see nothing whatever.

"Pshaw, Willis, thar hain't nobody down thar," said one.

"Then I'm a liar. Whar did I git this yer' arrer, say? I s'pose yer think Jim Willis is a slouch, don't ye? Ye'r' all wrong. He kin out-

jump, outswim and outfight any man in the foot-hills; now mind I tell yer. Why don't some on yer jump up and try me?"

"Don't crow too loud, Jim Willis, or yer mought chance ter git yer comb cut," cried Burt, unmindful of the fact that he had just saved the life of the man he wanted to fight. "I ken knock down and drag out all the Willis family in the foot-hills."

"Why don't you mount me, then?" said Jim. "Slide up to me once—oh, do."

What might have been the result—and a free fight was extremely probable, and the least thing to be expected—cannot be said; but, at this moment Lane and Ned burst into the circle and the men slunk away, looking cowed and ashamed.

CHAPTER VII.

UNDER THE MOUNTAIN.

"WHAT does this mean, men?" cried Ned. "What! a quarrel at the beginning of our hazardous enterprise?"

"We didn't mean no harm, leftenant," said Burt, sheepishly. "Jim was crowin' pretty loud, and we didn't like to hev him do all the talkin' hisself."

"I thought you were the best of friends, or I should not have sent you away together," said Lane.

"We are friends, I s'pose. But what do yer s'pose a feller ken do without a muss once in a while? But, say, Jim says that these fellows are down in the gulch. They shot arrers at him, and hit him in the arm."

"Bet yer life they did," said Jim.

"Perhaps it is only some Piutes, hid in the gulch."

"No, 'tain't," said Burt. "I heard 'em talk, and one was the Greaser, sart'in sure."

Ned advanced to the verge of the gulch and looked down. He lay prostrate and peeped over the edge. As he did so a pistol was fired with so sure an aim that the ball grazed his cheek. He drew back quickly, but not until he had caught a glimpse of the scene below. The rock on which they stood was not more than a foot thick, and extended like a shelf over the platform below, with a ladder between the two. A number of armed men were standing on this platform. He sprung up and told his friends what he had seen. At the same time a tumult rose in the regions below, and many voices and rapid steps could be heard.

"We have got them, lads," cried Lane. "How can we get sight of them?"

"I think if we could cross the gulch we could see better," replied Ned.

"A bridge!" was the cry.

The rangers rushed back to the opening and set to work. In less than half an hour they had brought three small pines, nearly forty feet long, laid them on the earth close to the edge of the chasm, and were ready for the bridge. Their way of laying them was unique. The limbs were left upon one end, and then the men united in lifting the tree upon its butt-end, and when this was done they let it fall across the rift in the rocks. The limbs struck first and were broken, and the body fell safely upon the rock.

The tree was then rolled close to the rocks, and another pushed over, and then the third. When this was done a very good bridge was completed, over which Ned was the first to cross. A volley of pistol-shots and arrows were sent at him without effect, and he reached the other side in safety. About half the men followed, stooping and keeping close to the wall, but two or three of them were slightly wounded. All who had now crossed could see the haunt. The platform was perhaps eighty feet in width, and as many in length. It was crowded with men, who were hurrying about, evidently in great haste. Even as they looked, a sort of screen rose suddenly in front of the cavity, and all was still behind it. They looked on in wonder. A wall of rock seemed to have risen, barring the room from their view. But a wind sweeping through the gully convinced them that it was only a canvas screen after all, for they saw it stir to the passing breeze. Whistles sounded on every hand, above and around them, and the canopy disappeared, and they could look again into the cavity. Not one of the band was in sight.

"This is strange," said Ned. "Who will go down with me into this place and see what has become of our friends?"

An unexpected volunteer came forward. It was the man Simpkins.

"I'll be gosh-darned if I won't go down there."

"I'm cur'us to see the inside of that show."

"You!" said Ned.

"Course I will. What of it?"

"Nothing, only there is some danger in the undertaking."

"Wal, never mind that. We'll try what we ken do, yew and I. Haow dew yew mean tew git down there?"

"That will be easy enough," said the young man. "Come over to the other side."

"What for?"

"You will see," replied the other. "Don't waste time."

They crossed the hastily-constructed bridge, and stood in safety on the other side.

"We want two or three lariats," said Ned.

The lariats were produced, and the young man fastened one end to the rocks in a strong manner and let himself down over the brink of the precipice, descending hand over hand. As he reached the spot where the cavity began, he pushed hard upon the rock, and then slid further down the rope, keeping the motion imparted by the push. By great muscular exertion, he kept himself swinging in this way, lowering himself a little at every swing, until he was near enough to the floor of the refuge to risk a jump. He then swung back for the last time, and released his grip upon the rope, striking on his feet on the stone floor. The moment he released the rope, the Yankee seized it and slid down. He found it easier work to reach the floor, for Ned gave him the impetus required, and he stood by the side of his youthful companion, looking about him with an amused glance.

"Queer place, ain't it?" he said.

"Very," replied Ned.

They stood upon a platform of quartz, in which glittered particles of gold. These were the days when quartz mining was not even thought of, and they never dreamed of the wealth which lay

beneath their feet. But, where had all those people gone who had occupied the platform not ten minutes before? There were evidences of a hasty flight, broken arrows, a bowstring, an Indian scalp, and a dainty moccasin, which Ned seized at once.

"What'll yew bet I don't know who owns that ar'?" demanded Josh.

"Perhaps you do," said Ned. "I think I do."

"It was the pretty gal. But she let that Mexican loose."

"Did you see her on the platform?" said Ned, eagerly.

"Oh, these boys—these boys," said the Yankee, shaking his head sagely. "Yew can't help their being themselves all the world over, can yew? Now, yew are jest dead in love with that gal in a minnit."

"Pshaw!" said Ned, "don't be a fool."

"Mebbe I'm a fool and mebbe I ain't," said Josh. "Don't yew s'pose I've got any eyes in my head, say? Hain't yew been thinkin' about her ever since yew saw her foot—and it was a gosh-fired nice little 'un tew—when she ran away after she cut loose the Mexican? Oh, no; I don't know anything 'bout love matters. I was in love once myself. Oh, dear!"

"Were you?" said Ned, absently.

"I guess I was. It was with Sary Ann. I never shall forgit the time I seen her comin' out'n her father's house, arter a dorg had stole a hank of ham. She had a broom, and yew bet she was a-dewin' some tall walkin'. I paused and watched her, and I loved her. Yew don't know Sary Ann, I guess. If I remember right, yew said so. Wal, she's a remarkable woman in her way. Darn me ef she ain't."

"Nonsense," said Ned, shaking off his abstraction. "Do not let us waste time, but make search. There must be a secret passage somewhere."

They passed along the wall, examining it closely; but nowhere could they find any evidence of an opening. Every thing seemed to stand as in the day when some great convulsion of nature rent the rocks and formed this rift. The Yankee whistled in a loud key as he kept up the search.

"Say, mister," said he, "darn me ef I know whar they hev gone. It looks a little shaky. Let's git out of this."

"I see no passage," said Ned, angrily. "Curse it; I can not endure to be baffled in this way."

He held a stone in his hand, which he dashed against the wall as he spoke. As he did so, he was surprised to see the wall near which he stood swing toward him. He started back, thinking that they were to have a fall of rock, when a gleam of light showed him that this was the secret passage of which they were in search. He sprung forward and seized it, as it was swinging back. In passing through, the robbers had somehow neglected to spring the lock, and the blow of Ned had caused it to open. They saw that a door of stone had been fitted into the rock, not a door regular in shape, but much like the massive fragments of quartz on every side. When closed, it would have defied the sharpest eyes to detect its presence, and nothing but the merest accident revealed it to the young Regulator.

"We have the secret!" cried he, eagerly. "Help me to prop this open, Simpkins."

As he spoke, there was a rush of feet in the passage, which looked so black and grim beyond the door. Ned had pushed forward a stone and blocked the door, so that it could not swing shut. As he raised himself, he saw a dozen savage faces close to his, and knew that a deadly struggle was at hand. He had heard before of such men. He knew that the woods and mountains were full of them—desperadoes who delighted in scenes of blood, to whom death was a mockery, because the dead, with them, slept forever. Sunburned, bushy-haired, beetle-browed wretches, with

"Cheeks stamped in,
As if with the iron hoof of sin."

Ned knew that the first blow is always best, and he hit out from the shoulder, right and left, at the foremost of the enemy. Two of them were floored by the strokes, but rose instantly. By this time Elliot had drawn his pistols and was ready for them. They seemed in no hurry to attack, and the Regulator retreated to the rock and placed his back against it. Josh sauntered to his side, still whistling, as if nothing had occurred to disturb the even tenor of his thoughts.

"Look out there," cried Ned. "I warn you that the first man who stirs dies by my hand."

"Look yer, stranger," said one of the men, roughly, "what are yer a-pryin' round these yer' diggins fer? I don't know as yer hev got any call to be hyar."

"The mountains are free to any who choose to come," said Ned.

"P'raps ye'r' right," said the man. "Mayhap yer don't know that thar's a set of outlandish ruffians hyarabouts, that don't think a man has any right to pry inter their business."

"Speak out," said Ned. "You know my business: I know yours just as well. There is no use whatever for you to beat about the bush. I am Ned Elliot, and I'm death on men of your kind. What do you mean to do?"

"You have got to go with us," said the man.

"Not if I can help it," said Ned. "Where do you propose to take me?"

The fellow pointed into the heart of the mountain.

"In there?" said Ned.

"Yer bet. Jest as neat a place as yer ever saw. Come along."

"I'm not quite ready," said Ned. "I don't see my way clear to going there with you. I guess you will have to excuse me."

"Couldn't think of it," replied the man. "The boss has got something to say to you. Really, you *must* come."

"Don't press it," said Ned. "I couldn't think of it."

"Come along, you!" cried the man, beginning to get angry. "We can't waste time with yer now."

The Yankee ceased his whistling, but his eyes betrayed no emotion, though a close observer might have seen that his feet were busy, and that they had collected quite a little pile of quartz stones. Every moment the long foot and leg would be extended, and another stone added to the pile. He kept his eye on the leader of

the robbers, who had turned angrily when the young man refused to go with them, and laid his hand upon his weapon.

"Lower your hand," said Ned Elliot, "or I will fire."

Instead of complying, the ruffian sprung at him with a savage curse, followed by his men. The pistols of Elliot exploded, and the villain fell dead, with a ball in his brain. The second was shot through the shoulder, and four men were opposed to two.

At this moment the Yankee shone out with undiminished luster. He stopped suddenly, and rose with each brown fist holding a "young rock." The next robber, seeing that the pistols of Elliot were empty, was rushing on to finish him with a knife, when the stone, impelled by the powerful arm of the Yankee, struck the ruffian in the face. The man uttered a groan and dropped as if shot, his jaw shattered like an eggshell. The second missile was dodged by the robber at whom it was aimed, at the expense of the man who followed him, and who received the stone on the top of his head, tearing off a neat bit of scalp two inches in length by an inch in breadth. The next moment the man he had missed grappled with Elliot, and the sixth, clutching another piece of quartz which Simpkins hurled at him, seized the Yankee. A deadly struggle now commenced, while a part of the Regulators looked on from above, and gesticulated and shouted to their comrades on the other side to descend, if they could, to the rescue of their young leader.

The robber who had seized him—a powerful fellow, by the way—had no thought that the slight frame of Elliot was so strong. But he quickly realized that he had no ordinary man to deal with.

The assailant seized him about the body, and tried, by the exertion of his superior strength, to bear him to the earth. But, the young man refused to be so conquered. His supple limbs were wreathed about those of his enemy in such a way as seriously to embarrass his movements, and they fell upon the rock together. To the surprise of the robber, he occupied a subordinate position, and the fingers of the Regulator were clasped about his throat in a decidedly unpleasant way:

"Let up," he managed to say.

"When you are a dead man," replied Ned, coolly, resisting the efforts of the man to rise, and still keeping that clutch on his throat. "You are in a tight place."

The man seemed to think so. He struggled bravely, but his breath was cut off, and a purple hue was creeping into his face. The Yankee had grappled with the remaining foe, and throwing him to the earth, took away his weapons and sat down on the prostrate form, stirring him up with his knife when he became restive.

"Oh, keep still; dew. What'n thunder dew yew want tew make a fuss for? Some of our boys will come down here in half a minnit."

The words had hardly left his mouth when the entrance of the haunt was darkened by human forms, and more than a dozen men appeared upon the scene. In less time than it has taken to tell it, both the victors were overpowered,

thrown on their backs and bound. And by the time the lanterns had been procured, and a portion of the Regulators descended, the door of the haunt was closed, and Elliot and the Yankee were in the heart of the mountain.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECRET HAUNT.

THE prisoners, lifted in the arms of stout men, were carried into the dark passage. They heard the click of a spring behind them, and knew that retreat was cut off. Elliot saw that he was in bad hands. The mountain outlaws wasted no love on a man like him, who hunted them down without mercy. But, even in his great danger, his eyes and ears were open. For a time, the first were of no service to him, for the passage was dark as night. By and by faint gleams of light began to appear, and the distant sound of voices to be audible.

"I've carried them long enough," said one of the captors. "Let 'em walk the rest of the way."

The cords were removed from their limbs, and they were set upon their feet.

"Now, look hyar, stranger," said the mountaineer, "let me give yer a bit of advice. Don't yer try ter run. If yer do, yer may bet yer life, I'll shoot yer."

"All right," said Elliot.

"Shall we blindfold 'em, Dave?" said one of the men.

"No," replied the first speaker. "As we don't mean they shall ever see daylight ag'in, what's the use?"

"Don't talk that way," said Simpkins; "I don't like it."

"Who the devil ar' yer, anyhow?" demanded the other, turning sharply upon the speaker.

"Me? Don't you know me, eh?" Wal, my name is Josh Simpkins, and I live 'way up by Bennington, Vermont. My father is a deacon. Every body knows him. He's bin an elder in the church for mor'n forty year."

"Dry up," said the outlaw. "Don't talk no more."

"But mister—" began Josh.

"Didn't yer lea me tell yer ter hold yer jaw? Now, look hyar. I'm boss hyar, jest now, and if you jest peep a'round, only jest peep as loud as a cricket, I'll take yer scalp."

"Scalp! Good Lord! Why that's wuss than a wild Injan. They don't know any better, they don't. But yew, gosh darn it, hev bin better brought up. Don't talk scalp tew a white man, please don't; I don't like it."

"Gag him!" said the outlaw.

In an instant Josh was seized, a stick thrust into his mouth and firmly strapped behind his ears in such a way that, if his tongue had ever so much disposition to wag, he found it impossible to wag it. But, he made fierce gestures, which only awakened laughter on the part of his captors.

The prisoners were hurried along at a brisk pace for at least ten minutes over a very rough floor and through chambers of all dimensions, when the lights grew brighter, and they saw at last that they had emerged into a large room, in which a number of men were seated about a

table, smoking and drinking. There might have been forty of them, including those who had entered with the prisoners. These men were of every nationality, though the Mexican predominated. They saw the volatile Frenchman, the stolid German, the hot-blooded Spaniard and the half-breed, of which Mejia and men of his kind are the type. The room was one of those caves so common in mountainous districts, and well suited for the haunt of such a band as this. It was lighted by torches, and the light was reflected from the glittering points of quartz, in which particles of gold could be plainly seen. Rough tables formed of hewn pine logs, were ranged through the center of the great chamber, and benches of the same material adorned the sides. Both tables and benches were supported by huge blocks of quartz. The men rose with a shout as the prisoners came in and crowded to get a better view of them. The expression of every face was that of fiendish joy. There were very few among them who had not seen or heard of Elliot, and all rejoiced in his capture. But one man strode from among the rest and faced them with an angry eye. It was De Castro. His countenance was distorted with passion, and he held up to view his discolored thumbs.

"Do you see them, wretch that you are?" he cried.

"Yes, I see them," said Elliot coolly. "They look rather blue."

"Devils! Then bear this in mind. You shall die. But, before you yield your breath, every inch of your body shall look like that. Did you think, when you tortured me, that a De Castro would ever suffer such indignity to go unpunished? They never forget."

"You trouble me," said Ned. "Come, what do you propose to do with me here?"

"Do you mean to say that you do not fear me?" shrieked De Castro.

"Fear you? Not in the least. If my hands were free, I should take pleasure in knocking you down, however."

De Castro drew a knife and rushed at him; but, half a dozen men seized and held the infuriated man back.

"Let me get at him!" he roared. "I will have his heart's blood!"

"All in good time, De Castro," said a slight fellow, who was holding him among others. "But we are not quite willing that you should have all the pleasure to yourself."

Elliot turned a single look at the speaker and read his nature in that quick glance. As we have said, he was a slight fellow, almost effeminate, in fact, with a face cut like an ancient cameo. But, notwithstanding the chiseled exactness of every feature, it was a cruel, bad face, after all. He was dressed in a somewhat foppish manner for an outlaw, and wore upon his right hand little finger a magnificent solitaire diamond, which glittered in the faint light as he laid a detaining grasp on the Mexican.

"Don't hold me, Ralph Garfield!" hissed the Mexican. "I must have my revenge!"

"And I repeat that you are entitled to it and shall have it," replied the young outlaw. "But this is not the time for such things. You dare not move without the orders of the chief."

"I forgot that," said De Castro. "He would

be angry if we dared to kill the rascal without his permission."

"Of course. He warned us of that before he went away."

The Mexican drew back, and all the men returned to the table, with the exception of three or four who stood near the prisoners. The person called Garfield rose and made a silent gesture to the guard, and they followed him, leading the captives. They passed through another narrow passage, into a smaller room, lighted by a torch thrust into a crevice. Here the guard left them, after removing the gag from the mouth of Josh, who had been wishing unheard-of miseries to light upon them, from the moment they united in stopping his tongue.

"You will remain here for a while," said the outlaw. "Food will be brought to you soon."

He turned to go away, but Ned called him back.

"What do you wish to say?" the ruffian demanded.

"Who are you?"

"You heard the Mexican call my name a moment ago. What else?"

"Where have I seen you before?"

"I don't think you ever have."

"Have you ever seen me?"

"A hundred times."

"Are you a member of the Brothers of the League?"

"I have the honor of being an officer in the band. You have seen them; judge for yourself what your chances are."

"I have not thought of that. If, as you say, you know me, and have seen me many times, you know that I came into the mountains for no boys' play. My set purpose was to root out the very name of this robber league from California. I have been unfortunate, but I have left those behind me who will do my work."

"Fools that they are! In three days the vultures of the sierras shall feed upon their bodies."

"You will never see that," said Elliot, warmly.

"I shall. We have ways and means of disposing of such enemies that you never dreamed of. They shall find, to their cost, that the brothers of the band are not men to be defeated."

"You will find that my friend, Captain Lane, is not a man to leave his work undone."

"What is he to the chief?" replied the outlaw. "Look at me. Do I seem a man very likely to yield myself, unresistingly, to the sway of another? But I have done it. I have given myself wholly to the chief."

"Whom do you mean?"

"The leader of the band," said Garfield.

"Who is he?"

"Who can tell? He is one whom the injustice of the country we call free has driven to this mountain region, which, like Roderick Dhu, he holds against all, and will continue to hold it."

"What is his name?"

"I tell you again I do not know. I only know this—he is a man to lead and be obeyed."

"What is he, after all, but a butcher of brave men?" said Elliot. "What is he but an Ishmaelite, his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him?"

"No man ever died by his hand unless he tried to penetrate to this spot. I tell you now, that you have seen for the last time the bright sun. No human being ever entered this cave unless as a sworn member of the band, and left it alive."

"I knew you were murderers."

"We will defend our secret at any price. It is our duty, by our oath."

"This cursed Mexican, De Castro, is a member of your band, is he not?"

"He is one of us."

"I wish we had killed him. My heart misgave me that we should get into trouble on his account. You can't trust a Greaser. He will betray you yet, if he has the chance."

"We do not fear it. But I must leave you. A man will come soon and bring you food."

"Now we hev done it," said Simpkins. "Ef this don't beat all. I wish't I'd stayed tew him with Sary Ann. But, Lord! she wouldn't listen tew it. 'Go 'long,' sez she, 'an' make yer fortin'.' Wal, I guess I've done it. Got enough to last me till Gabriel blows his horn."

"I am sorry for you," said Elliot. "Why did you come into the sierras?"

"'Cause I'm a durned fool," said Josh, beginning to snivel. "I can't help it. That feller told me of a man up here that he said was chock-full of gold—full up tew the top. I didn't like tew hev it go tew waste, and here I be, like a herring, ready tew be ripped open and smoked. But, gosh a'mighty! what right hev they to hurt me? I'm not a fightin' man. I didn't cum to destroy anybody."

"Bad company destroyed poor Tray," replied Ned. "You were taken with me; and I fancy the man whose brains you nearly knocked out with a stone, and the one whose scalp you peeled off, and the one you were straddling when we were taken, would not give a good account of you."

"But they were comin' right at me. Dog-gone it, could I hev let 'em do as they durned please? Not by a mule's leg! It was all their own doin's. Don't yew think, ef I was tew tell 'em how't I didn't mean no harm, they'd sorter let me off easy?"

"No, I don't think they would, my poor fellow. Try to look the matter in the face. These are bloody villains, who think nothing of the life of a man; indeed, who would destroy life without a single compunction. Be certain of this, then—they will not let either of us escape. You heard what the young man said."

"Yes, I did, blast his pictur'! He ain't no kind of a man. Anybody with half a heart wouldn't kill men off like that. I won't die easy, anyway. I'll lick some on 'em right out'n their boots, jest as sure as my daddy is a deacon."

"Did you see that girl who let the Mexican go?"

"Didn't I! Warn't she a bu'ster! As pooty as a full-blooded heifer."

"I wish I could see her again."

"I don't! Darn a woman, anyhow! We got along all right till we met her. A woman is sure tew upset everything. I never knew it tew fail. It's their natur' tew stick their noses in tew everybody's business. But she was a pooty

one! She kind o' made a feller feel sick about the gizzard. But—Hullo! here comes something tew eat."

A man entered with a large wooden dish containing venison, and another of corn bread. In spite of their danger, both men were hungry, and speedily cleared the dishes of their contents.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRAITOR'S DEATH.

IN that dismal place, the flight of time was hardly to be observed. The two men fell asleep and woke again, before they were disturbed by any visitors. They supposed it to be morning of the day succeeding their capture, when two of the outlaws appeared and led them away. Passing through two or three narrow passages, they entered a room somewhat furnished. A sort of raised dais stood at one side, supporting a high chair or throne, which was filled by a man of colossal proportions, who wore a mask. On each side of this platform stood two men, armed with naked swords, also masked. A little in the rear of the "throne" was another seat, not so high as the first, upon which sat a woman, whom Ned at once recognized as the one who had met them at the pass. She wore no mask, and her fine face looked very sad as she saw them enter. The two men halted with their prisoners about ten feet from the throne, and saluted its occupant.

"Chief," said one, in Spanish, "we have obeyed your command. The prisoners are here."

"It is well," said the chief of the outlaws. "You may retire."

The escort withdrew, and shortly after two other men entered, taking seats on either side of the chief. One of them, in spite of the mask which concealed his features, Ned knew to be Ralph Garfield.

"We are all present," said the chief. "Let seats be brought for the prisoners."

As if they had been in waiting, two attendants brought in stools and at once retired.

For a moment there was silence in the room; then the chief, suddenly stretching out his hand with a commanding gesture, spoke:

"You all know why we are here. It is needless to waste words with the Brothers of the League. For years we have had a secret, which we have kept inviolate, and which we still intend to keep. Life has been sacrificed, again and again, for this one end. The oath we have sworn has made this necessary, if we would preserve what we have so long guarded from the world outside. We have here two men, who, in spite of warnings which should have been enough, persisted in making themselves masters of our secret. They have done so to their cost. I will question them. The youngest of the prisoners must be examined first. What is your name?"

"Edward Elliot."

"You are not unknown in the foot-hills of the sierras. You belong to the band known as Regulators?"

"I have the honor to be a lieutenant in that body."

"What was your purpose in coming hither?"

"To root out the outlaws called the Brothers of the League."

"How many men have you in the band?"

"Enough to suit my purpose."

"Nonsense. I know every man in the force. You cannot deceive us."

"Then why do you ask?"

"Do you know to whom you speak?"

"I do not; neither do I care. I suppose you to be that bloody-handed apostate known as chief of the League. The guilt of a hundred murders done in the sierras, rests upon your head, and for a hundred murders you shall atone."

The man listened quietly, and by no motion betrayed that he felt in the slightest degree annoyed. He laughed lightly, as he said:

"You are good in presenting a case to a jury. But how, knowing all this, do you dare to speak to me in this manner?"

"For the reason that I know that nothing I can say will in any manner change my fate."

"A good idea, my young friend. Make the most of a short life. You deny nothing then. You penetrated our secret with eyes open, and are willing to take the penalty?"

"I am ready for whatever fate awaits."

"Reflect, young sir," said the girl, who had not, thus far, uttered a word. "Think what you say. There may be an avenue for escape."

"I see none," said the young man, with a look of open admiration at the speaker. "I am prepared for the worst."

"It is hard to die so young," added the girl.

"You have the best of your life before you. Everything beckons you on. Life is just opening. Why need you die?"

"I shall live as long as God wills it, senora," said Elliot. "I do not give up my life recklessly. I am at the mercy of the merciless men who have seized me, and do not care to beg my life with their hands on me."

"But there is a chance for him; is there not, chief?"

"There is," said the chief. "One chance."

"What is it?" said Ned.

"Join the band."

"Indeed!"

"Join us. You are a brave man, just the sort of recruit I require for a responsible trust. I offer you what I never offered another, taken after killing our men."

"Let me understand you. I can purchase life by joining my fortunes with yours. Is there an oath?"

"A most solemn and binding one. No secret order, not even the Masonic, is bound by as strong a tie as the Brothers of the League. But what we swear to do, we will perform. You have come in good time to see how we deal with one who is false to us. Stand aside. When you shall see how we keep our oaths, then you may decide as to the feasibility of accepting my offer."

The stools of the prisoners were removed back to the wall, and they were seated again. Then the chief sounded a whistle at his girdle. In a moment the curtains of the room were pushed aside, and a solemn procession entered. The banditti marched in double file, each wearing a

black mask, and holding a naked dagger in his strong right hand.

"Chief," said the girl, "I ask permission to retire."

"It is granted," said the chief. "It is not necessary that you should look on scenes like this."

As she hurried out, a man who marched between the first two bandits, and who alone had his face uncovered, flung himself at her feet and clasped her hand in his.

"Do not go, senora, for God's sake do not leave me here alone."

Elliot saw with surprise that it was a miner who had given him the best information as to the whereabouts of the band, and who had been left at the village from which the Regulators marched.

"Release my hand," said the girl. "You know that I can do nothing for you."

"But, stay by me. Do not leave me alone with these men. They will kill me. I know they will."

"I repeat, I can do nothing. Let me go."

She struggled to free her hand, with a face painfully impressed with compassion, but the man clung to her, and would not let her go, crying out that he had no hope but in her. The outlaws forced his hands away from her and she hurried out, putting her fingers in her ears to shut out his mournful cry for pity, and for her to stay. He fell prostrate, and seemed to have no power to raise himself again. The men lifted him, but, as often as they did so he slid to the floor. Apparently the sight of the stern chief had robbed him completely of strength.

"Cannot the man stand?" said the chief.

"Let him have a stool."

Elliot remembered him as a strong, active fellow, a perfect athlete, and wondered that the fear of a single man should so rob his strongly-built sinews of their strength. The outlaws ranged themselves on each side of the long room, keeping their weapons bare. The chief rose and shouted:

"Who is this without a mask?"

And the band answered, with one voice:

"James Conway."

"How is this?" said the chief. "James Conway is a member of the League. How came he here without a mask?"

"Worthy chief," said one of the men, "he has forfeited the right to wear a mask while the band are in council."

"Why?" demanded the chief.

"He hath betrayed the secrets of the band."

"He lies!" shrieked the man. "I never did it. I never spoke a word. I was true to the band in every way."

"Everything must be proved," said the chief. "Words are nothing. Who is he that dares to speak thus of a member of our band?"

"One of the band," replied the accuser. "One who can prove his words."

"Of what do you accuse James Conway?"

"He was at the Selton Mine. While there he met Ned Elliot, and told him that the band were concealed in this mountain."

"Did he say where?"

"I do not know. I heard him say that, if Elliot would give up his title in a certain claim,

he would tell him where to find the Brothers of the League, and destroy them."

"Did he do so?"

"I know that he got the claim, and that he went with the band as far as the foot-hills. It was there we found him."

"I was coming up here," screamed the accused. "I tell you I was coming up here to tell you that the Regulators were coming. I did not betray the band. I meant to betray the Regulators. Upon my word I meant to do it."

"You cannot deceive us," said the chief, sternly. "James Conway, are you a member of the Brothers of the League?"

"I am," said the man, bravely.

"You have sworn to be true to us?"

"I have, worthy chief. I meant to keep my oath."

"Do you remember that oath?"

"I—I think I do, worthy chief."

"Listen, and you shall hear me repeat it, and when I have done, we shall see if you have kept the oath."

Elliot held his breath as the deep voice of the outlaw toned out that fearful oath. He had never heard anything so terrible. Two bloody daggers, a skull and cross bones, were brought forth and laid on a stand before the chief. One hand was placed on them, and the other was raised upward.

"In the presence of God, I do solemnly swear that I will ever keep inviolate the secrets of the Brothers of the League. I swear by these bones, and this skull, which are the bones and skull of one who was unfaithful to the vow, which, of my own free will, I now take. I swear to keep secret the passes to this mountain retreat, and in no manner, by hint, word, or sign to betray the presence, numbers, designs or acts of the League. I swear never to make the signs of the League unless in the service and interest of the League. I swear to aid and succor a Brother in danger or distress, even at the risk of life. I swear to serve the League by murder, rapine, robbery and theft. The man who is not a Brother, and has gold, I swear to treat as lawful prey. Should I ever knowingly violate this, my lawful oath, I consent to be led, in an open manner, before the band, my face uncovered; then, in the presence of drawn daggers, while the chief repeats to me this solemn oath, I swear to abide by the trial which I have incurred. If I am condemned, the chief shall order the sacrifice, which shall be a stab from each member of the band in succession, taking care to avoid vital parts; then the chief shall shoot me through the head. My flesh shall be cloven from my bones and burned to ashes. My heart shall be taken from my bosom and buried, but my bones shall remain in the cavern, as an everlasting memorial that I was then and there sacrificed to the avenging justice of the League. So help me God, as I keep this vow!"

The guilty wretch had been enduring the greatest agony while the chief was repeating the horrid pledge. He knew that he was doomed. He knew that all his crime was laid bare before the League, and that they knew that, for a little gold, he had broken that fearful oath. As the last word broke from the lips of the chief, a fear-

ful cry escaped from the prisoner's lips, and snatching a dagger from one of the men, he sprung suddenly upon the leader and made a vicious blow at him. Only his remarkable agility and strength of arm enabled him to elude it. The traitor recoiled, foaming at the mouth and casting savage glances about the room at the men who had been his comrades.

"Keep off!" he hissed. "Don't dare to touch me. I won't be murdered by you."

"Seize him, men!" cried the chief.

The men sprung forward, when the infuriated criminal singled out the man who had informed against him, and killed him at a single stroke. He was then overpowered. All his defiant bearing and great strength seemed to come back to him at the hour of death.

"I defy you all!" he cried. "I hate you, black-hearted villain, calling yourself chief of the League. If I could have planted the knife in *your* heart, I would have died contented."

"Brothers," said the chief, "ye have seen and heard. Is this man guilty unto death, or no?"

"He is," cried the band, as with one voice.

"Then keep your oaths."

Forty daggers gleamed in the torchlight, as they clustered about the doomed man. One by one those daggers were reddened, but, through all, the greatest care was taken that no weapon should touch a vital part. At last, every blade was ensanguined, and the victim, faint from loss of blood, but showing wonderful fortitude little in keeping with his bearing upon first entering the room, sunk upon one knee and cast an undimmed glance at the chief.

"Finish your work, fiend," he said. "Your power I despise, your name I curse, and upon your future I call all the vengeance of an offended God."

With his pistol in hand, the chief stepped down from the dais on which he had been sitting up to this moment. Something in the unblenching fortitude of the doomed miner touched him. Though showing the white feather at first, when he saw that hope was gone, he met his fate like a man. The chief pitied him. What of that? Eujolras pitied the sergeant of artillery, and yet he shot him. His words are immortal. "We must do what we must."

"Have you any messages?"

"No."

"Nothing to say?"

The face of the man lighted up suddenly.

"Yes. I summon you to meet me in *my* place before two suns shall rise and set."

The chief raised his pistol and placed it to the ear of the traitor. All turned away their heads. Then followed the report, and the outlaws turned to behold the body of Conway stretched upon the stone floor. The chief put up the pistol, and said, in a tone of triumph:

"It is done!"

CHAPTER X.

INEZ.

THE dead body, lifted by the strong hands of a number of men, was silently borne away. Not a face in that wild band expressed the slightest contrition for the death of him who had been a valued member of the League: not a man dared question the justice of the deed which the person

known as chief had just committed. They had subscribed to the same solemn oath, which had sent Conway to his doom, and they felt that in their leader they had found a master—one fitted by nature to exact obedience from his followers.

The wonderful man who controlled the Brothers of the League had all the characteristics of a great leader. In another sphere he would have made a director of armies second to none, for he had a strong and abiding faith in his own powers, and control over others which was almost unbounded. He could read at a glance the inmost soul of a man of weaker mind, and bend him to his will.

This was the man who faced Ned Elliot. But, the young man, too, was one of those self-reliant natures which bend to none, and yet he felt in some degree the magnetism of this great ruffian's presence.

"You have seen how we deal with men who break faith with us," said the chief. "You will know by this that traitors have but little chance. Since the band was founded, sixteen years ago, but two men have been faithless. The fate of the one you have seen—but the other—"

"What of the other?" said Elliot.

"There are his bones!" was the quiet reply.

"No man escapes us. We have agents everywhere. I hope you will make up your mind to be one of us. You will be assured of riches, and when you have served the proper apprenticeship of one year in the mountains, you shall have a mission to the towns. Say you will be one of us."

"I would die first."

"Don't decide too soon. I have an interest in you. I seldom meet one who does not bend to my will more easily than you do. It is better for you to give up. If you do not, you die."

"I shall never join you."

"I will give you until to-morrow to decide."

"I ask no time."

"You will need it to prepare for the great change," said the chief, solemnly. "And now you will be led back to your cell. I will speak to your companion alone."

"What's the use of that?" said the Yankee.

"Don't dew that. Let Ned stay."

"Remove Mr. Elliot," said the chief. "Let the other stay."

"Wal, if a feller is as sot in his way as yew ar', 'tain't no use tew git up on's back about it. Have it your own way; but it ain't fair."

"What isn't fair?"

"Never yew mind," said Josh. "Jist drive on with your funeral, ef that's your profession."

"Answer my question, fool."

"Thar yew go ag'in; git mad in a minit. I knew yew woul'. They allers dew who ain't got sense enough to eat pickles without red pepper in 'em. But I say, old feller—don't go, Ned, boy—'tain't fair fer one man tew have his own darned way all the time. Say what you choose about it, 'tain't fair."

"Remove Mr. Elliot," said the chief, once more. "I shall have something to say to this person."

The young man was led out, leaving Josh shivering on his stool. In truth, he did not like

the manner of the chief. His reckless way of firing pistols had set the Yankee against him. He regarded him as a man careless of human life, and being extremely desirous of retaining the vital spark, he did not care to remain in that dangerous vicinity. But, he was in for it, and concluded to make the best of a bad trade.

"Now, my man," said the chief, "what are you doing here?"

"Doin' here? That's a pooty question to ask! Wasn't I pulled, twisted and yanked intew this stun house without my consent? A pooty question to ask me, *what* I am doing here! I'd like to bust the feller's head what brought me into your bedroom, that I would. You want to see me go? Then open your shop and I'll show yew how to whip a cat-tail into ribbons—that I will."

"My men did not bring you into the sierras," said the chief.

"That's trew. But I guess a man can dew as he durn pleases about whar he goes."

"People often get into trouble by the exercise of their rights," replied the chief. "You would have done well to remain at San Francisco, or better still, at home."

"That's jest what I say! See here, Mr. Robber—"

"What did you call me?"

"I don't know what *tew* call yew, durn me if I dew! I'm in a fix, anyhow. Wal, *captin*, I'm sure that's a good name. I can't say no fairer than that, can I?"

"Go on."

"Go on, yew say. I was only askin' yew tew let me dew that, and yew wouldn't let me."

"Nonsense. I mean, tell your story."

"Oh, I was goin' tew say that I remarked tew Sary Ann, jest before I cum away from home:

"'Sary Ann,' sez I, 'I don't like this at all. I want tew stay tew hum.'

"Sez she, 'Yew old fool, if yew don't git out'n this kitchen quicker then yew ken say *scat*, I'll pull every hair out'n yer head, and leave yew as bald as Caesar.'

"After that, I had tew much regard for my dignity tew stay. So I cut stick for Californy. I ought tew hev stayed tew hum, I know."

"You are in a sad predicament, Mr.—I did not get your name."

"I wish yew had it. I wish anybody had it but me. I'm sick and tired of this kind of business—tired tew death. I'd dew anything tew git out. Say, mister; I ain't no use tew yew here. Let me go, can't yew?"

"Impossible. We must guard our secret. Your foolish curiosity has destroyed you. The moment you set foot upon the ledge from which you entered this retreat, you left all hope behind."

"Don't say *that*, mister," said Josh, almost in tears. "Yew make me feel bad; gosh darned if yew don't! I didn't mean any harm, comin' down thar. Ned said he wanted some one tew go with him, and I thought I might as well go as anybody."

"You see the result of your hardihood. Doubtless you have looked your last upon the sun in heaven, for I doubt if my men will receive you as a member of the band on any terms. You killed one of them and maimed two

more, and they are more angry at you than at your companion."

"Now is that fair? I only ask fer information; dew yew call that fair? Ned killed a man, tew, dicn't he? And they ought tew be jest as mad at him as me. But that's jest my luck. I s'pose they think it ain't fair tew throw stuns, don't they? I hadn't no other weepous."

"Suppose they were to consent to allow you to join the band—do you think you would join us?"

"Would I have tew take that oath?"

"Certainly."

"I don't like tew swear. My father was a deacon, and he brung me up tew be careful of my words. I never heern the old man swear but once, and that was when some of the boys tied a yaller-jacket's nest tew his boss's tail, so that he c'u'd not see it. Wal, he started off kinder mod'rate at fu'st, and the fu'st time the old mare switched her tail she pulled out the plug the boys had put in the nest. Yew see, they tied a string tew it, and fixed it so that the fu'st jerk would let the little devils out. Away went the old mare, and the deacon see'd that the flies was pooty thick about her; but he didn't mind that, and druv on. Bimeby the mare h'isted up her hind feet and kicked the dash-board out'n the old shay, and then the deacon see the nest, and, I shame tew say it, he swore rite out loud. The minnit he did it, he felt cold sbivers run through him, and he got down and pulled off the nest and threw it away and druv hum. Next meetin' night, he got up and told them all about it, and they let him off. But the boys used tew poke their fun at him once in a while, when he was ridin' out in the shay, and every time they said 'hornets' he had to bite his lips to keep from sw'arin'."

"What does all this talking amount to? Will you join us if you get permission?"

"Wasn't I tellin' yew? I don't like tew swear sech a swear as that. Them bones is mighty cold and ugly, Mister Rob—Captin, I meant ter say. I don't think I'd like tew put my hand on 'em the way yew did. Say, that was a mighty nice gal yew had in here."

"What are you talking about?" said the chief quickly.

"The gal. I tell yew, she was a mighty smart-lookin' critter. 'Tain't often yew find sech a one as she is. Say, mister, dew yew know that Ned thinks a heap of that gal?"

"Silence, you fool!" thundered the chief, rising. "You are like the rest of your race, inquisitive, masking under the guise of stupidity a world of native cunning, which nothing can overreach. But, hear this in mind: speak on any subject you choose, but avoid the subject you just now touched on, or we shall fall out."

"I don't know what I said then tew have yew git mad," said Josh. "I told the trewth, anyhow. It's darned hard if a feller can't say a word without yew gittin' your back up. But, see here: s'pose I say I won't join you—what will yew dew tew me?"

"Kill you!" shouted the chief in a terrible voice.

Josh leaped from the ground and alighted on the stool again, ejaculating "Good Lordy!" So utterly was he deprived of speech that, after

that ejaculation, he had no power to utter a word, but sat in silent terror, his teeth rattling like castanets, in spite of all efforts to keep up courage.

"Get up, you tooby. You shall have the same chance as your companion. To-morrow you shall know your fate. But, first, I will show you how you will die."

"Hold on," said Josh feebly. "I don't believe I want tew know about that. S'pose you don't tickle me, as the pig said tew the brush-maker who wanted his bristles."

"Come, I say."

"Oh, dear. Now I'm a gone coon! Say, mister, what's the use of bein' so darned hash with a feller like me? I won't tell a word of what I've seen—not a single darned word. I don't want to go with yew. I don't feel very well myself. Why can't yew let up on me a little, say? Oh, darn it all! I'll come. When you look at a feller like that, there ain't no sayin' anything about it."

He followed the chief into the passage. The former held a torch and led the way. They turned to the right and threaded the depths of the cavern for some distance, and at last he came to a large, vaulted room, a dark, unhealthy, dismal place, where the heavy moisture dripped from the walls, and a fetid vapor was exhaled from all around. In the center of this black place was a dark pit, running down, nobody knew how far, from which a steam was rising continually. Whatever it might be, whether vapor from a boiling spring, or from some other cause, no one knew. Upon the brink of this the chief paused, and lifted his torch high up.

"Come here," he said.

"I ken see it where I stand," said Josh, with great promptitude. "I don't believe I want to come any nigher."

The look which the chief gave him compelled him to turn his reluctant feet nearer to the edge of the pit and look down.

"You see this place," said the chief, "and can understand why so many have disappeared in these mountains and never left a sign. This black pit has been the grave of many a man before your time, and shall be yours to-morrow if you choose to be obstinate. I hope you will not. It will be better for you to be careful what you do and say."

He led the bewildered Yankee back to the room of audience, and gave him to the care of two guards, who returned him to his prison. The chief himself turned back into the audience-chamber, and passing through a side-curtain—for cloth took the place of wood in all the doors of the cavern—he entered a room furnished with great taste, evidently for a woman's use. The girl who had witnessed the first scene of the trial in the council-hall, rose from a couch upon which she had been lying, and spoke to him. He took off his mask and showed a face in keeping with his character—dark, stern, relentless as fate itself—a handsome face too, withal.

"Is it over?" she said.

"Yes," he answered. "The traitor has been punished."

"Did those men look on?"

"You mean the prisoners? Yes."

"What do you mean to do with them?"

"You know our laws. These of the Medes and Persians were not more unalterably fixed than mine, nor better kept. I have given them the opportunity, which I grant to many whose faces please me, and perhaps they will join the band. But, I fear not. The young man has as strong a will as my own, and he seems determined to brave me."

"But, Arthur, would you kill this young man if he should not accede to your terms? It would be dreadful."

"Ask no questions, Inez. If he refuses, and you do not see him again, as you will not, you will know that our laws have received their due."

Her eyes began to flash.

"It would be worse than murder, Arthur."

"Call it what you will," he said, gloomily.

"You ought to know me by this time."

He paused, then began to pace the room with rapid steps, as if troubled deeply. Then he muttered, as if communing with himself:

"It seems to me as if my fate was near, and that my end is to be as tragic and gloomy as my life. I wish to end this wild career. I wish to turn my back upon my old associations. But what can I do? A ban is on me. The moment I appear in civilized life the bounds of the law will be upon me. But I know a country where I can be at peace, and I will seek it."

"What land is that?" asked the intently-listening girl.

"The free city of Hamburg. There I lived two years, perhaps the happiest years I have known since my childhood. I think I will go there again."

"Then why destroy these prisoners whom you have taken? Why not make them promise not to molest you? If they promise, you have nothing to fear, for they will keep their word, I know."

"I cannot do that. The laws of the band will remain when I am gone. Ralph Garfield, my lieutenant, will be captain. I shall keep my oath sacred, even though I leave here. But, all depends on one thing."

"And what is that, Arthur?"

"Your love, Inez."

"My love! Have you ever doubted that? Cruel as you are to many, to me your kindness has been that of a father, and I should be wanting in gratitude not to love you for it."

"That is not the love I crave," said the chief, quickly. "I want you for my wife. I am not an old man. I was forty-two years old yesterday. For sixteen years I have watched you, and have seen you unfold in beauty like a flower, and have kept in heart the purpose of one day making you my wife."

"Oh, Arthur; I cannot, cannot be that."

"Be careful, Inez!" he said, somewhat fiercely. But instantly he changed his tone. "See what a brute I am, darling. I have frightened my bird. Sit down by me, Inez, and I will tell you something I have promised to tell you, the story of your early life."

She drew a chair to his side and sat down, evidently afraid of him.

"At twenty-three years of age," said the chief, "I was an outlaw. No matter what my crime,

it was enough to incarcerate me for life within the walls of a prison. In the prison I learned two things—how to suffer and how to inflict suffering. I learned what it was to be pitiless toward my fellow-man. I went into that prison grieving like a boy as I was over the ruined hopes of my life. I came out a man with crushed hopes, ruined in reputation, bearing a life as useless to others as to myself."

"Poor Arthur. Did you stay long in prison?"

"Not I. Before a year had passed I broke my bonds and escaped. I went on board a whaler bound for the northern seas. The captain did not use me well, and at San Francisco I deserted. I could not stay in the cities. I was sick of them. I had nothing from them but sorrow and toil. The free breath of the sierras was the thing for me. For two years I lived as a hunter of deer and small game. I had a cabin in Murderer's Canyon. Do you know where it was built? I will tell you. It stood upon the ruins of your father's home."

"My father! Did you know my father?"

"No, Inez. I never saw him. I will tell you how it happened. A year before I came to Murderer's Canyon, your father lived there with your mother and you, a year-old babe. He had an enemy who found him out, and killed him, but your mother bloodily avenged his death, and then killed herself. Two men were left of the band who attacked your father, and one of them promised your mother that he would care for you. He did it; but, a year after, I found him on these hills in a dying condition. I aided him, and took you to my heart. What you are, you owe to me and me alone. You cannot rob me of that thought."

"I do not wish to, Arthur. The poor orphan thanks you from her heart. You have preserved her from all harm, and she owes all that she is to your care."

"The old man gave you to me," said the chief, "and I trained you up as my child. At this time I began to make friends in the sierras. Men who were outlawed began to flock to Murderer's Canyon. They heard that I always gave shelter to such. At this time the thought came into my mind to make of these persons a great brotherhood in crime. The refugees fell in with my plans readily. You see the result. For the last eight years, while I saw you growing in beauty and grace, I had only one purpose in life. I thought I would train you to love me, and that we would go away, and be very happy in another land than this."

"Arthur, you do not know the pain it gives me to tell you that can never be."

"Inez, be careful!"

"I must speak the truth. I have revered you as a father. You must not hope that I should ever love you in any other way."

"I am a man of hot blood," said the chief, hoarsely. "I have been guilty of great crimes. Do not force me to a greater."

"Arthur, these very crimes of which you speak are the ones which drive you from me. I cannot marry a man who has the stain of innocent blood upon his hand and soul. For then I should become a partner in his guilt."

"Innocent blood?"

"Yes. Innocent of everything but unfortu-

nately falling into your hands. Oh, Arthur, what can I think, when men like these you took yesterday are butchered, simply because they have dared to come into a region of which you so unjustly claim to be lord. Even now, when I told you to set them at liberty, since you mean to leave the band, you put me off with the pitiful plea that the band must be considered before all else. Set these men free. It will be the beginning of a course of good deeds which shall, in some degree, atone for the acts of an ill-spent life."

"This from you, Inez! I thought no one living dare say such things to me, and yet I hear them from you, and cannot answer you. I am weak as a little child. Inez, if I set these men free, if I cut all connection with the evil past, will you love me? Will you be my wife?"

"You ask too much, Arthur. Ask me to go with you wherever it is your destiny to wander, and I will obey you as a daughter should. But, that is the dearest tie that ever can exist between us."

His eyes began to gleam like hidden fires suddenly revealed.

"That will do, girl. You have said enough. Then know my purpose. You *shall* do as I wish, and these who have broken in upon us, if they do not consent to join us, shall meet the fate our laws decree."

He dashed on his mask. She tried to stop him, but he pushed her rudely aside, and rushed from the room, leaving her filled with dismay.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CONSUMMATION.

THE Regulators were not idle all this time. They saw with great sorrow the disappearance of their lieutenant and the Yankee, but, like true men, set at work to find means to set them free. The captain was in great grief at the loss of young Elliot. The brave fellow had been like a younger brother to him for a long time, and the strong-limbed Maine lumberman was a true friend and brother. But, he had seen enough to satisfy him that there would be no child's play in assaulting the robbers in their stronghold. The men set to work with their hatchets and constructed a number of rough ladders, which they hung over the face of the cliff in such a way that they could easily ascend and descend. When all was ready, a guard of ten was left in the ravine, that no one should disturb the ladders; the rest descended. They knew that there was a door somewhere in the inside wall of the precipice, but where, none could determine. Everywhere it seemed but a rough, shining wall of solid quartz. The captain went along the wall, striking it, and intently listening after every blow to discover if there was any indication of a passage. He was disappointed. Every part of the wall rung as true as if it were solid throughout.

"Strange," said the captain to his men. "I can't make it out."

A hearty laugh from within the mountain was the only answer to this admission.

"It is plain that the rascals are on the watch.

By Jove, we will have them out of that. Speak very low, boys. Don't let them hear a word we say. Do you mean to leave Ned Elliot in their hands?"

"Never," cried the men.

"Very good. Then all we have to do is to find these fellows. It's plain they've got a burrow somewhere here, and we must dig for it. Where are those bars you found on the shelf?"

"Here, sir."

The men brought forward a number of picks and drills, which lay loose upon the ledge, as if the robbers had only just abandoned work.

"At that wall, boys, and see if you can find a hole."

The picks and drills were at work in a moment, guided by strong arms. For half an hour nothing was heard but the steady "chip! chip!" of the drills, as they worked their way into the side of the wall before them, searching for the passage, known to exist. The evening was coming on. Just as it was getting dark, one of the drills suddenly disappeared from the hands of the worker. The man declared that just as he pierced the rock, something seized the drill and dragged it out of his hands. However that might be, they had found the opening. But, it was impossible to make the attack without torches, and about the time the chief rushed out of the presence of Inez in such mad haste, the rangers were placing powder in the opening they had made, ready to blow up the secret door. When all was prepared, the Regulators left the pit, with the exception of the captain, who remained to light the slow match. The men were making torches, and getting their weapons ready for the final assault.

The chief, in the mean time, had lifted the curtain of the room in which the young Regulator was confined, and looked in on a strange scene. Two men were struggling for life or death upon the floor of the cavern, and a third sat on a small boulder of quartz, a little way off, regarding the struggle with a benignant eye. This cool individual was our friend Josh. One of the fighting-men was Elliot, and the other, as he was turned to the light in the struggle, showed the livid face of the Mexican, De Castro. Surprise and anger for a moment held the chief dumb, that one of his men should dare to anticipate his vengeance, but his next thought was to let them fight the battle out. In either case it was a gain for him. The Mexican was not a man to be trusted, and the young Regulator was much in his way. If De Castro killed him, Inez could say nothing, as the Mexican had good cause to hate him. He sat down on another boulder and watched the varying fortunes of the fray. Neither of the prisoners had been bound, a circumstance which De Castro had forgotten when he stole in to take vengeance on the American for the torture-test on the sierras. Josh, confident in the powers of Ned, had taken no part in the struggle, but acted as a sort of referee. He kept up a running fire of comments throughout the struggle.

"Hit him again! That's right. Come at a free-born American citizen with a knife, will yew? What use was yer knife tew yew, eh? Hullo, mister! How are yew? Right nice little scrimmage, I guess. Never seen sech a one, did

yew? What dew yew think of the way Ned hits with his left, say? Wasn't that a putty nice lick he got in that time, say? Don't you think he's putty good for a light weight?"

By this time the iron hand of Elliot had closed upon the throat of the Mexican with a grip which nothing but death could unclose. The strength of that grip caused the tongue of the fellow to protrude from his mouth, and a bluish whiteness to creep into his face. The chief saw that it was time to interfere. He rose and tore away the hand of Elliot from the throat of De Castro, and suffered him to rise. Elliot also rose, not in the least injured, but with a face flushed by exercise.

"What does this mean, De Castro?" cried the chief. "Speak the truth, and no prevarication."

"I have no wish to prevaricate," said the Mexican. "I came here to kill him."

"For what?"

"He is my enemy."

"So he is mine. But I am willing to wait the justice of the band."

"So am not I."

"What has he done to you?"

De Castro held up his still swollen and discolored hands.

"You can see for yourself. By his order I was tied up by the thumbs until I confessed where the band lay, and agreed to lead him to them."

"And did you?"

"I led them till I got an opportunity to escape; but, I told them nothing of this cavern."

"Good. But you must not take justice into your own hands. Remember that we have laws, and that they are as binding on me as on the poorest member of the League. You shall have all justice. I had not heard of the outrage to you."

"Thanks, worthy chief. Have I permission to retire?"

"You have."

The Mexican slunk out with a malevolent glance at Elliot, who had calmly seated himself upon a stone, and was arranging his disordered clothing. He nodded slightly to the chief and said:

"It is not yet morning. You promised to give us till then."

"Circumstances have made it necessary for you to decide earlier," said the chief. "We must have your answer now."

"You have mine already."

"Be pleased to repeat it."

"I will not join you."

An exultant look came into the eyes of the chief. He had hoped that the young man would continue obstinate, and give him a chance to destroy him, as he could now do. The nature of the man was bloody. With the single exception of his love for Inez, he had none of the milk of human kindness in his bosom. Human life was a slight thing in his hands. Death was to him an eternal sleep. He never slept less quietly from the fact that he had killed a man half an hour before he retired to rest. The acute Yankee saw the look in his face.

"Make him keep his promise tew yew, Ned. He said he'd give yew till mornin'," said he.

"Be silent, fellow," said the chief. "Speak for yourself. What do you intend to do?"

"Me? I'm goin' tew join yew. I'm goin' tew be a robber. I've got conscienshous scruples ag'in' bein' shot threw the head and put in a hole."

"Very well. You may remain here until morning, when the oath will be administered to you. As for your companion, let him come with me."

He drew his pistol from his belt and signed to Elliott to follow him. Ned rose, and bidding the Yankee a cordial farewell, left him blubbering on the stone, while he followed the dark-browed man to his doom. As they passed out into the hall the curtain of the room of Inez was lifted, and she came out to meet them. Ned thought she looked more beautiful than ever. The traces of recent tears were on her cheeks, and she threw herself at the feet of the chief.

"Spare him," she sobbed. "You cannot have the heart to kill him."

"Out of my way, Inez. Get back to your room. You have no business here."

"I must speak to you. I must beg of you to think what you are doing—to pause before it is too late."

"No, Inez; you have spoken the doom of this young fellow, who is brave as a man need be, and will meet his death like a man. You waste my time and his. Rise. We must do our work as it comes to our hands."

"You say nothing" said Inez, appealing to Elliot. "You do not even ask for your life at his hands. Join with me."

"Dear lady," said Ned, "if the thanks of one who is near death, and whose burden you have made lighter by your kindness in this last hour, can be of any use to you, take mine. I shall go to my death as to a wedding, and in dying, one picture shall be always before my eyes, and it shall be yours, as you look now, asking for my life."

"Beg for your own," she sobbed.

"I cannot do that, even for you. This man wishes for my blood, and he will have it. Let it be so. I have little to gain in living. I am one of those whom fickle fortune has robbed of all my friends, and for your kindness I am not ungrateful."

"Come on," said the chief, waving the pistol in the air.

"Stay, Arthur. Let me entreat you once more to—"

"You waste your words. Come on, boy. Your death is certain. I understand her interest in you now."

"Arthur!"

At this moment a fearful explosion shook the cavern to its very center. The mine of the Regulators had been sprung.

"What is that?" cried the chief, pausing, with his hand upon the hilt of the pistol. The tumult increased, and the clash of weapons, the cries of men in mortal agony, and the fall of heavy bodies could be heard in the dark passages.

"Ah-ha!" said Elliot. "The boys are here. I knew they would not leave me."

"Back to your room!" said the chief, in thundering tones. "Stay there until I return, Inez."

You, sir, return to your Yankee friend. Your doom will not be long delayed."

With these words he darted away. Elliot, looking about him for a weapon, caught up a short iron bar which lay upon the rocks near the door of Inez's room. She laid her hand upon his arm, and begged him not to go.

"The boys are at work," said Elliot. "They need me."

"You only go to your death," pleaded Inez. "Stay with me—stay—stay!"

He turned to her with a smile.

"You can hardly ask me anything I would not do, but I know you would not have me bring dishonor on the name I bear."

"You do not know the power of these men. You cannot pass them. They lie between the door and you."

"I cannot go back," said Elliot. "I will break through their ranks."

"If you will join in this fray, follow me, and I will lead you to your friends by another route. You can evade the Brothers."

"Lead on," said Ned.

The girl turned into her own room, and Elliot followed. But they had not gone ten steps when the Yankee had joined them.

"What do you want here?" said Inez.

"Goin' with Ned; in course," said Josh.

"Don't waste time foolin'. Show us the way. I heard what you said to him. Josh is himself again!"

She caught up the torch burning in a niche, and led them into a narrow passage which opened into her room at the back. All rapidly advanced, Josh stopping just long enough to seize a bar similar to the one with which Elliot had armed himself. Five minutes brought them to the main passage, in the rear of the Regulators, who were driving the Brothers before them.

The assault had been so sudden that the ruffians were taken by surprise, for they had not dreamed that the Regulators would blow up the door. One thing was needed to make them fight, and that was the presence of the chief. He joined his men just as Elliot appeared from the other end of the passage, followed by the Yankee. Both pushed their way at once to the front rank. The brave girl, too, sought to keep close to Elliot's side, as if to perish, should he fall. A ranger put out his hand and stopped her.

"Go back, little one," he said. "The balls are flying thicker than hail."

"Take her out of danger, Bates," shouted Ned, in the midst of the cheers with which the men greeted him. "See that she comes to no harm."

"I will not go back," said Inez. "Let me remain. I can take care of myself, and will not retire."

The man hesitated, but seeing her safely ensconced in a place where she was sheltered from the direct fire of the robbers, and at the same time was witness to the battle, Bates left her to mingle in the fray.

One by one the Brothers dropped and died. The chief showed an undaunted spirit. Though wounded, he stood in the front, disputing every inch of the ground. He had emptied his pistols

and rifle, and was using the latter as a mace. The Regulators shrunk before the blows he dealt, and looked for a man strong enough to oppose him. He was soon found, for Captain Lane, snatching the bar from the hand of Josh rushed at him, whirling the iron above his head as if it were a feather. An outlaw threw himself before him, but went down, his skull crushed like an egg-shell by a single powerful blow. The rifle of the chief was broken at the stock, but the barrel was a fearful weapon in such hands, and clashed against the bar with a force which nearly tore the weapon from the captain's hand. But, Lane recovered himself, and gave blow for blow; a better match for the chief could not have been found in all California. The men on both sides cheered their leaders. Man after man dropped, and yet the struggle between the two giants continued. The fortitude of the chief wrung a cry of admiration even from his enemies. But the great number of the rangers insured their success.

The resolute chief cast a quick glance about him; only three of his men held their feet. He knew that all was lost; when, suddenly, gathering all his mighty strength, he broke through the diminished ranks of his enemies, and darted toward the spot where Inez stood. They heard a shriek, and, leaving the battle-ground, Elliot sprung forward, just in time to see the chief plunge into the passage, holding Inez in his arms. Josh Simpkins and two of the rangers followed. Elliot had taken a torch from one of the men, and hurried on. They came up with him, standing, faint and bloody, on the brink of the chasm which he had destined for the grave of Elliot, holding the struggling girl in his arms in a vise-like grasp.

"Keep back!" he shouted. "Advance a step, and I drop her into this pit."

The young man recoiled in horror. The expression of the chief's face was frightful.

"I meant that this girl should be mine," said he; "and she shall. In life or death, she can be no other's."

"Madman!" cried Elliot, "let her go free."

"Fool! do you think I trained her up to lose her? No; we either die together or live together; you may take your choice."

While the two were talking, Simpkins slipped over the edge of the cliff, and, walking on a narrow ledge, out of sight of the chief, reached a point just in front of him. The chief having turned to address Ned, was taken by surprise when the Yankee suddenly rose, clasped his arms about his legs, and tripped him up. Before he could recover himself, Inez had struggled from his hands and escaped. He rose quickly, and made a savage rush at the Yankee, then standing on the very brink of the chasm. Josh, evidently anticipating as much, stooped suddenly, and the outlaw, with a fearful howl, pitched headlong into the bottomless pit, never again to be seen by mortal eye. Uttering a piercing shriek, Inez dropped to the ground in a swoon. Carrying her back to her own room, the young officer went to look after his wounded men. Among those killed on the side of the robbers they found De Castro, who had fallen under the powerful arm of Lane.

Not a man of the League had escaped. The

head gone, the life of the body was gone also, and the Brothers of the League were broken up forever.

Captain Lane went to Inez when all was over, and the rangers were again camped in Murderer's Canyon.

"I am a man without household ties," he said. "I have no children—you have no home. Will you be a daughter to me?"

And Inez, moved by his kindness and interest, agreed, with tears of joy at the good Providence which sent her help when it was most needed.

The secret of the voices they had heard in the canyon was easily explained. The cavern ran through this portion of the hill like a honeycomb, and there were many small apertures, which a person on the outside would not be apt to find, and which could be made use of with impunity by a person inside. The one who warned them of their danger was Inez herself, who knew that the Mexican would betray them.

In a few months, Lane left California forever, and Inez went with him. In those few months she learned to like Elliot so well that the parting gave them heartfelt sorrow. Lane took a house in Boston, and Inez became his housekeeper. About six months after, they had visitors, whom they little expected. Elliot and Josh walked in unannounced, just returned from California. They had found Murderer's Canyon unusually rich in gold, and both had made a fortune.

A few days after, when Ned asked Inez to be his wife, she did not say no. Josh was at the wedding, as also was his better half, the redoubtable "Sary Ann," who appeared in a gorgeous silk of a flaming pattern, enjoyed the wedding, immensely, and went home to tell her neighbors how kindly she had been received by the "Boston folks," and how they said "her Josh was as rich as Mr. Elliot."

He made shrewd use of his property, and became one of the richest land-owners in Vermont. Every year they paid a visit to Boston, and were the honored guests of the Elliots, and Mrs. Elliot was sure to make Sary Ann cry by telling her how Josh had saved her life. The Yankee woman had a better opinion of her husband than when he started for California.

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 Ready May 3d.

A New Issue Every Wednesday.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
 98 William Street, New York,